

**CHOMSKY ON OBAMA'S NOBEL • 'INCONCEIVABLE!'**

DECEMBER 2009

**IN THESE  
TIMES**

**Jews on J Street**

**Pitbullies of  
the Right**

**INSIDE CUBA**

**VOICES FROM THE ISLAND**

**THE REVOLUTION AT 50**

**AN IN THESE TIMES SPECIAL EDITION**

**EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY ACHY OBEJAS**

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# mixed reaction

## JUST THE FACTS



**205** political prisoners in Cuba as of February 2009

**1,500** Cubans detained in Cuba for political reasons in 2008

**2,199** Cubans intercepted at sea and repatriated by the U.S. Coast Guard in 2008

**11,278** Cubans who arrived in the United States and claimed asylum in 2008

“

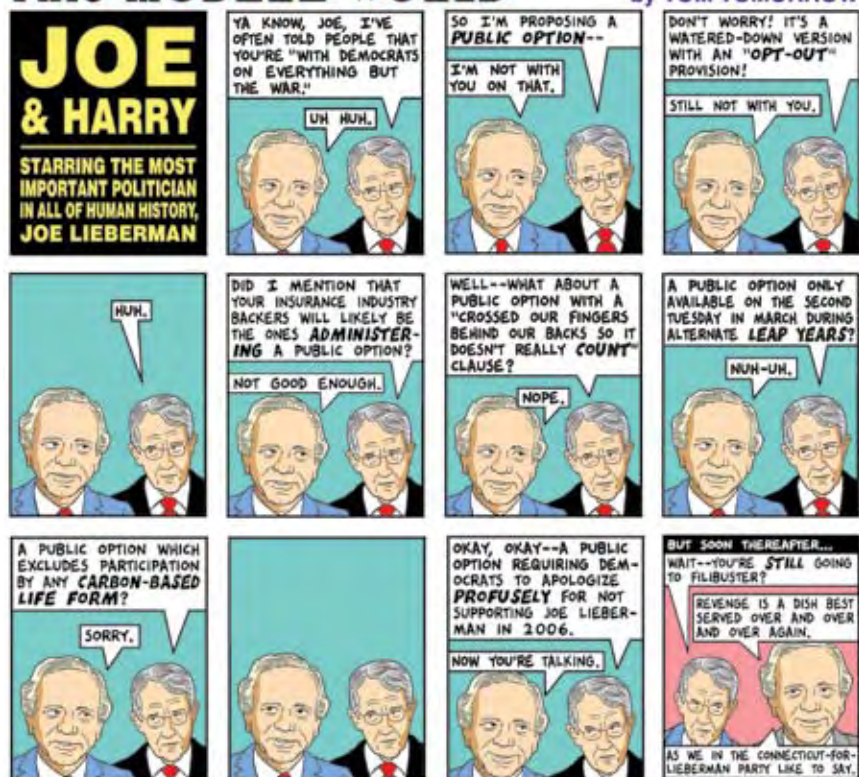
Freedoms, like privileges, prevail or are imperiled together. You cannot harm or strive to achieve one without harming or furthering all.

—JOSÉ MARTÍ, POET AND FATHER OF THE CUBAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

”

## THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



## QUID PRO QUO

### THE QUID:

The group CO<sub>2</sub> Is Green is running a TV ad campaign to build public opposition to climate change legislation. The commercial claims: “There is no scientific evidence the CO<sub>2</sub> is a pollutant. .... In fact, higher CO<sub>2</sub> levels than we have today would help the Earth’s ecosystems.” The ads urge people to contact their lawmakers and tell them to vote against CO<sub>2</sub> regulation because “CO<sub>2</sub> results in a greener Earth.”

### THE QUO:

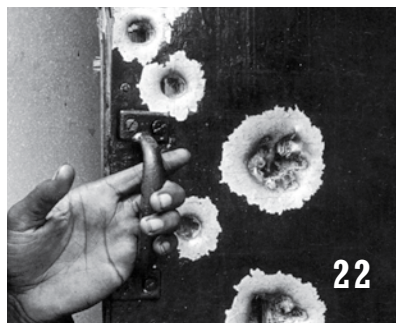
According to the EPA, since the Industrial Revolution, the burning of oil, coal and gas has increased CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the atmosphere by 35 percent, which has contributed to global warming and its host of problems. H. Leighton Steward, the man behind CO<sub>2</sub> Is Green, is a retired oil and gas bigwig whose income is closely tied to CO<sub>2</sub> pollution. Steward has served as chairman of the U.S. Oil and Gas Association



and the Natural Gas Supply Association, the vice chairman of Burlington Resources, Inc., and as a director at the criminally inclined Enron Oil and Gas. Yes, for Steward, CO<sub>2</sub> is green—just not environmentally.

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Cover Photo: Kaloian, from Cincuenta Veces Cuba (Fifty Times Cuba)

## Dear Reader,

In a normal *In These Times* issue (not a special edition like this one, which includes our first-ever pull-out supplement) the editorial would occupy this space.

This month, however, you will find our editorial, "Against the Demons Who Kidnap Information," on page 8A of "Inside Cuba: Voices from the Island, The Revolution at 50."

José Alejandro Rodríguez, the author of the editorial, works as a journalist for the newspaper of the Union of Young Communists, *Juventud Rebelde* (*Young Rebel*), on whose website this essay originally appeared.

"Information is a public benefit, and we can't substitute it with opportune and sanctioned news, with virtual information, with information-propaganda or convenient information, information held up with tweezers, or whatever it might be called," he writes. "In any case, information—with its nuances, its shades of gray—will always make us more efficient and more revolutionary, more conscious of the historic moment; more prepared to discern the possible from the impossible, and more participatory."

Rodríguez is writing about practicing journalism in Cuba, but his observations speak to a universal truth: citizens cannot freely and fully function in their society without an independent press to inform them.

Since Nov. 15, 1976, when *In These Times* (then a weekly) published its first issue, it has been our mission to extend political and economic democracy, and to oppose the tyranny of marketplace values over human values. To achieve these ends, *In These Times* has dedicated itself to reporting the news in accordance with the highest journalistic standards; to informing and analyzing popular movements for social, environmental and economic justice; and to providing an accessible forum for debate about the public policies that shape our future.

That is what we here at 2040 N. Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago strive to do. But it is only possible because you and other members of the *In These Times* Community provide this magazine with the crucial financial backing that allows it to publish.

On behalf of everyone, thank you for your support.

In solidarity,



Joel Bleifuss  
Editor & Publisher

**P.S.** And, on behalf of us all, a special thanks to Achy Obejas for editing and translating "Inside Cuba: Voices from the Island."

# IN THESE TIMES

"With liberty and justice for all..."

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*In These Times* (ISSN 0160-5992) is published monthly by the Institute for Public Affairs, 2040 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *In These Times*, 308 E. Hitt St., Mt. Morris, IL 61054. This issue (Vol. 33, No. 12) went to press on November 5, 2009 for newsstand sales from December 1 to December 29, 2009. The entire contents of *In These Times* are copyright © 2009 by the Institute for Public Affairs, and may not be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, without permission of the publisher. Copies of *In These Times* contract with the National Writers Union are available upon request. Contact the union at (212) 254-0279 or [www.nwu.org](http://www.nwu.org).

Subscriptions are \$36.95 a year (\$59 for institutions; \$61.95 Canada; \$75.95 overseas). For subscription questions, address changes and back issues call (800) 827-0270.

Complete issues and volumes of *In These Times* are available from Bell and Howell, Ann Arbor, MI. *In These Times* is indexed in the Alternative Press Index and the Left Index. Newsstand circulation through Disticor Magazine Distribution Services, at (905) 619-6565. Printed in the United States.



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The work of these writers is supported by the Puffin Foundation First Amendment Fund.

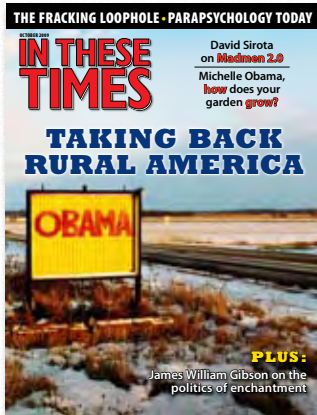
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# letters



## Back in the USSR

The interview with Barbara Ehrenreich on positive thinking ("The Dark Side of the Bright Side," November) and all the gimcrack movements related to it, reminded me of the much less sophisticated propaganda of the late, unlamented Soviet era. I remember a pronouncement that if one did thus-and-so "life would move more quickly along." What's the hurry? Now, looking at the world, sometimes I'm glad I'm old.

Joanne Forman  
Submitted via e-mail

## Stupid Democrats

Kevin O'Donnell in "It's the Message Stupid" (November 2009) writes that the Democratic Party should look to George Lakoff for help with their communication. I totally agree. But I am wondering if O'Donnell is aware that Lakoff was consulted by the Democratic Party in the past and apparently has fallen out of favor. What made me aware of this is the August 15, 2008 article "Who framed George Lakoff?" that appeared in *The*

*Chronicle of Higher Education*. Raising the question, would the Democrats take Lakoff back?

David J. Cranmer  
Providence, R.I.

## Moral Hazards

Your November issue could be a textbook on the party line on moral hazard. Needle exchange programs, Narcan to prevent deaths from drug overdoses and preventing foreclosures encourage irresponsible behavior. However, giving banks trillions of tax dollars to gamble with, allowing the finance sector to regulate itself and leaving corporations to promote "happiness seminars" while they lay off employees doesn't create moral hazard. And people wonder why our country is in a mess. Thanks for telling the real story so clearly and succinctly.

Lindsay Sleffel  
Submitted via e-mail

## Open Unions

I read, with much interest, David Moberg's article about Richard Trumka ("Labor's New Leader," November). I have lived in Denmark since 1985 and been a member of the office worker's union (HK) since 1986.

There is one thing I have never understood about union membership in the United States. Why is membership dependent on contract negotiating? Why are labor unions not open to any person who wishes to join them?

In all the time I have been a member of HK, they have

only been my direct representative for six years. They do, however, offer me at all times other incalculable benefits. One of the most important benefits is legal representation. Any time one of my employers mentions some change that might infringe on my rights as an employee, I usually just say, "Well, I will have to run that by my union."

Nine times out of ten, this ends the discussion. Right now I work in a company where we are only two: the owner and me. Now I know he is a greedy SOB because he considers greed a virtue. I have had to use this line on him on four or five occasions, and it works like magic.

Jeff Brown  
Århus, Denmark

## INTHESETIMES.COM

At the end of October, talks began in Honduras to return ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya to power after months in exile. Visit [InTheseTimes.com](http://InTheseTimes.com) for Jeremy Kryt's web-only reports from Tegucigalpa, Honduras' capital, on the latest developments.

Kryt, one of few American journalists reporting full-time from Honduras, reported on the torture and murder of a young activist in his article "The Lonesome Death of Pedro Munoz.")

Also at [InTheseTimes.com](http://InTheseTimes.com): Pete Redington on Ralph Nader's foray into fiction, *Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us*; columnist Megan Tady reports on TV stations' troubling "news sharing" agreements; and Alex Karlin proposes a practical solar solution to ward off global warming: "100 miles of mirrors."

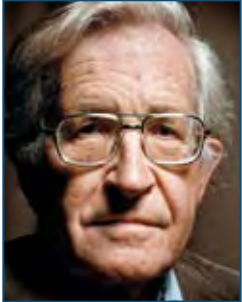


- At [www.WorkingInTheseTimes.com](http://www.WorkingInTheseTimes.com), our labor and workers' rights blog, recent top stories include:
- David Moberg on the thousands of people who gathered in Chicago for a "showdown" with bankers.
- R.M. Arrieta on California grocery store janitors' struggles to protect themselves from harsh cleaning chemicals and secure workplace safety standards.
- Roger Bybee on the latest healthcare reform news, and progressives' uphill battle for a "public option."



BY NOAM CHOMSKY

# War, Peace and Obama's Nobel



**T**HE HOPES AND prospects for peace aren't well aligned—not even close. The task is to bring them nearer. Presumably that was the intent of the Nobel Peace Prize committee in choosing President Barack Obama.

To *The New York Times*, the prize “seemed a kind of prayer and encouragement by the Nobel committee...more consensual American leadership.” The

nature of the Bush-Obama transition bears directly on the likelihood that the prayers and encouragement might lead to progress.

The Nobel committee's concerns were valid. They singled out Obama's rhetoric on reducing nuclear weapons.

Right now Iran's nuclear ambitions dominate the headlines. The warnings are that Iran

may be concealing something from the International Atomic Energy Agency and violating U.N. Security Council Resolution 1887, passed in late September and hailed as a victory for Obama's efforts to contain Iran.

Indian officials greeted U.N. Resolution 1887 by announcing that India “can now build nuclear weapons with the same destructive power as those in the arsenals of the world's major nuclear powers,” the *Financial Times* reported.

Both India and Pakistan are expanding their nuclear weapons programs. They have twice come dangerously close to nuclear war, and the problems that almost ignited this catastrophe are very much alive.

Obama greeted Resolution 1887 differently. The day before he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his inspiring commitment to peace, the Pentagon announced it was accelerating delivery of the most lethal non-nuclear weapons in the arsenal: 13-ton bombs for B-2 and B-52 stealth bombers, designed to destroy deeply hidden bunkers shielded by 10,000 pounds of reinforced concrete.

It's no secret the bunker busters could be deployed against Iran.

Planning for these “massive ordnance penetrators” began in the Bush years but languished until Obama called for their rapid development when he came into office.

Resolution 1887 calls for the end of threats of force

and for all countries to join the NPT, as Iran did long ago. NPT non-signers are India, Israel and Pakistan, all of which developed nuclear weapons with U.S. help, in violation of the NPT.

Iran hasn't invaded another country for hundreds of years — unlike the United States, Israel and India (which occupies Kashmir, brutally). To believe Iran would use nuclear weapons to attack Israel, or anyone, “amounts to assuming that Iran's leaders are insane,” strategic analyst Leonard Weiss observes, adding that Israel's missile-carrying submarines are “virtually impervious to preemptive military attack.”

The Iranian regime is harsh and repressive, and no humane person wants Iran—or anyone else—to have nuclear weapons. But a little honesty would not hurt in addressing these problems.

The Nobel Peace Prize, of course, is not concerned solely with reducing the threat of terminal nuclear war, but

## The selection of Obama for the Peace Prize raised eyebrows, not least in Iran, surrounded by U.S. occupying armies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

rather with war generally, and the preparation for war. In this regard, the selection of Obama raised eyebrows, not least in Iran, surrounded by U.S. occupying armies.

On Iran's borders in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, Obama has escalated Bush's war and is likely to proceed on that course, perhaps sharply.

Nonpartisan budget and security monitors report in *Government Executive* that the “administration's request for \$538 billion for the Defense Department in fiscal 2010 and its stated intention to maintain a high level of funding in the coming years put the president on track to spend more on defense, in real dollars, than any other president has in one term of office since World War II.”

The Nobel committee might well have made truly worthy choices, prominent among them the remarkable Afghan activist Malalai Joya. This brave woman survived the Russians, has withstood the Taliban and now the return of the warlords under the Karzai government.

Throughout, Joya worked effectively for human rights, particularly for women; she was elected to parliament and then expelled when she continued to denounce warlord atrocities. She now lives underground under heavy protection, but she continues the struggle, in word and deed. By such actions, repeated everywhere as best we can, the prospects for peace edge closer to our hopes. ■

BY SUSAN J. DOUGLAS

## Pitbullies of the Right



**B**Y THE TIME you read this, election day will be over and pundits will have told us all about how the races were a referendum on Barack Obama. But at least one race—for the congressional seat in New York’s upstate 23<sup>rd</sup> district—was about many peoples’ new national pastime: bullying. Bombarded by right-wing hate radio, denounced by many in the Republi-

can leadership and vivisectioned by vitriolic bloggers, moderate Republican Dede Scozzafava ended her bid for the seat three days before Election Day. Attacking Scozzafava as not far right enough, conservatives rallied behind third-party candidate Doug Hoffman, who does not even live in the district, and drove her out of the race.

And consider this. Journalist Amy Wallace published “An Epidemic of Fear: How Panicked Parents Skipping Shots Endangers Us All” in the November issue of *Wired* magazine. In it, she profiled the pediatrician Paul Offit, who invented the vaccine for retrovirus. Offit emphasizes that any risks from vaccines are vastly outweighed by the risks from diseases kids and others could get if not vaccinated. Wallace was inundated with hate mail. As she told NPR’s Melissa Block, “I’ve heard a lot of anger. I’ve heard that I’m stupid. I’ve heard that I’m greedy. I’ve heard that I did this to get famous. I’ve heard that I’m a whore, I’m a prostitute.” Well, why not? Anti-vaccine crusaders have sent Dr. Offit threats like, “I will hang you by your neck until you are dead.” This is not about the pros and cons of the vaccine debate: it’s about the bullying, aggressive responses so easily and immediately evoked.

In the past several years, there have been various exposes and concerns about bullying in schools and, of course, cyber-bullying. This phenomenon was made especially famous by the suicide of Megan Meier, who killed herself after getting a post from a neighbor lady posing as a teenage boy, telling her the world would be better off without her.

Bestselling books like *Queen Bees and Wannabes* and *Odd Girl Out* about girl-on-girl bullying have inspired intervention programs around the country. Hidden camera reports by local television stations have spurred anti-bullying programs and campaigns in many school systems. If

you Google “bullying,” you will find more than 10 million sites, many of them about bully prevention videos, books, games and information programs.

But what a bunch of hypocrites, teaching our kids that bullying is wrong and hurtful, when every day we see how much it works and is rewarded. Who is the current de facto leader of the Republican Party? One of the biggest bullies of them all, Rush Limbaugh. Fox News may only have about 2 million viewers during primetime and an average of 1.2 million viewers in a day, but the vitriol of its uber bullies—Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck—is what extends the station’s reach and influence beyond its limited viewership. And let’s not forget the high-profile female pitbull Ann Coulter, who is amply rewarded for her ferocious verbal as-

saults. Whose demonstrations get covered in the media: gay rights activists or tea-baggers? Bullying is boffo box office in our country.

Frank Rich of *The New York Times* and Tom Frank, the

heroic liberal who writes a weekly (and very good) column for *The Wall Street Journal*, have both linked the attack-dog mode of tea-baggers, Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck and the like to a powerful sense of persecution. “Persecution fantasy is Fox News’s lifeblood,” Frank writes; “give it the faintest whiff of the real thing and look out for a gale-force hissy fit.” Well, Tom Frank should know. You should see his hate mail from right-winger *WSJ* devotees. His piece about Fox News not being, in fact, a legitimate news channel brought a torrent of abusive comments: “Absolute myopic rubbish, clearly the stuff of wanna be journalism;” “despicable;” “idiocy.”

What alarms so many progressives and liberals is not so much that Obama has been criticized by the right for most of his policies (after all, we criticize him too), but the sheer fury and vehemence that engorges these attacks. The Facebook poll asking whether Obama should be assassinated was typical of this rage. What the conservative Republicans seem to be counting on in its war over the future of the party is that bullying will work within the party, and by extension, it will work to woo independents back to the fold and destroy Obama’s presidency to boot. Given the very large and seemingly expanding media stage that bullying seems to get, and the rewards it accrues, they may, in the end, be right. ■

**What a bunch of hypocrites, teaching our kids that bullying is wrong and hurtful, when every day we see how much it works and is rewarded.**



BY PAUL MAGNO

# Arms Control is Not Enough



**E**ARLY ON A Friday morning, I switched on my radio to listen to the news as I slowly woke up. What a peculiar dream ... President Barack Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Then I realized. I *was* awake. He actually *was* this year's recipient for his "vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons."

I'm acquainted with folks who have labored for such a vision for quite a while. Twenty-five years ago, several friends and I entered a weapons factory in Orlando, Fla., on Easter morning. We disarmed elements of a Pershing II missile, then being deployed in Europe and became known as the Pershing Plowshares. By midsummer the eight of us were on our way to federal prison, sentenced to three years.

Our action, like many Plowshares actions, concentrated on first strike nuclear weapons designed not for deterrence, but for a disabling assault on the Soviet Union. By virtue of deployment of first strike missiles by the U.S. and the Soviet's response in kind, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists'* Doomsday Clock was set at six minutes to midnight in the early 1980s. This was the closest we were to nuclear calamity since the Cuban missile crisis nearly 20 years earlier.

During the 1980s, much of the disarmament movement put great effort into understanding the substance of U.S. nuclear weapons strategy and technology in order to stand against it. At our trial, we were able to discuss the history of the Pershing II missile, from 1962 when it was a twinkle in Robert McNamara's eye to its deployment in Europe in 1983. We talked about Martin Marietta's profiteering from it (the company is now Lockheed Martin, the world's largest military contractor and still a major player in nuclear weapons research and development). With such knowledge, the nuclear abolition movement was able not only to advocate against these policies, but to educate and mobilize large numbers of citizens to nonviolently resist the entire first strike weapons agenda.

The Reagan administration, hawkish as it was, had its hands full trying to maintain momentum for such weapons. A worldwide public debate over the politics and morality of

nuclear weapons ensued, forcing Ronald Reagan to negotiate an agreement to destroy nuclear weapons with Michael Gorbachev. The result was the 1987 abolition of Euromissiles on both sides, unprecedented in the history of the nuclear arms race. The Pershing II, designed for a 20-year lifespan, was consigned to the scrap heap after only four.

These accomplishments came from widespread grassroots fervor based on a radical vision of disarmament. Today, new challenges confront us.

In the early 1990s, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Cold War was over and a "peace dividend" replaced the bloated military budget our country had sustained for decades. Then President H.W. Bush sent 500,000 troops to the Arabian Peninsula, unleashing an air war against Iraq. In just six weeks, this eclipsed all the bombing tonnage dropped on Vietnam in more than a decade.

Attention to the stealthy but steady advances in weaponry and hope for their reversal advance has seriously diminished from its apogee in the 1980s. But, as the Nobel committee recognizes, Obama has renewed the conversation with speeches on arms control promoting new warhead reductions, even envisioning their eventual elimination.

But arms control is not adequate. We need to understand how nuclear strategy and dangerous new advances in space weaponry combined threaten planetary devastation. As the sole superpower, the United States employs that threat to leverage domination of the world. Would Obama jeopardize that arrangement? Hard to imagine.

Still, his Nobel award is our opportunity. For the first time in years, changing our country's nuclear policy is on the table.

That can be our catalyst to build a new visionary peace movement. We need the skills and knowledge of vigorous policy analysts, a widespread grassroots movement objecting to these threats to life, and a nonviolent resistance movement that can impede the machinery of death and ward off omnicide.

We make a mistake if we invest the president with our hopes and wait for him to give us back a mere taste of the possibilities. Really, the hope is ours to employ, to fashion the disarmed world we want—the world to which we have a right. The question we need to answer: "Is it in us?" ■

**We make a mistake if we invest Obama with our hope. Really, the hope is ours to employ, to fashion the disarmed world we want.**



Coal is loaded onto a truck at a mine on top of Kayford mountain in West Va. The mountain top was demolished to extract coal.

MANDEL NGAN/AP/GETTY IMAGES

## Blowing Their Tops

### Miners, environmentalists clash over coal

BY MELINDA TUHUS

**C**HARLESTON, W. VA.—TENSIONS in southern West Virginia's coal country are higher than they've been in most residents' lifetimes, as opposition to mountaintop removal coal mining increases.

On October 14, the US Army Corps of Engineers held a public hearing in Charleston, W. Va., on whether to eliminate a controversial fast-track permit for mountaintop removal (MTR) mining. The "Nationwide 21" permit authorizes discharge of mountaintop mining debris into valleys and streams with virtually no environmental oversight if the Corps has determined that only minimal damage will result.

Every day, 3 million pounds of explosives are used to blow the tops off ancient mountain ridges in southern West Virgin-

ia to access thin seams of coal underneath. The EPA estimates that by 2010, MTR will have destroyed more than 2,000 square miles of mountains throughout southern Appalachia. It has already buried 2,000 miles of streams, according to data from the EPA and the Department of Interior's Office of Surface Mining.

Permit opponents say stream burial is a violation of the Clean Water Act and that the damage is irreversible. If the fast-track permit is eliminated, coal companies would have to undergo a more rigorous environmental review for each mining site. Supporters of the permit believe its elimination would hurt the mining industry and ancillary professions, like trucking.

Charleston's civic center was filled to capacity for the October hearing, with almost all 740 seats occupied by coal sup-

porters. Only a dozen or so MTR opponents signed up to speak.

Grant Crandall, general counsel of the United Mine Workers (UMW) of America said he supports coal jobs, wherever they might be. One woman received a standing ovation after describing mining jobs as West Virginia's lifeblood. "Those who don't agree can leave our state and take the mayflies, frogs and whatever else with you," she added, referencing studies showing species are disappearing as streams get filled in.

When permit opponents got up to speak, they were booed and shouted down; most were unable to say anything. Retired underground miner Joe Stanley was shouted down as he tried to speak against the permits. "I'm not against mining," Stanley said after the hearing. "We can do underground mining and do it safely."

But it wasn't just shouts and insults that environmentalists and local opponents of MTR had to endure—they were physically harassed by permit supporters.

Stanley said the intimidation is the worst he's seen in a career that included rough-and-tumble efforts to organize miners into the UMW. "There were miners in the crowd who said they were getting paid to stomp our asses," he said. If not for two Charleston police officers who intervened, he noted, "death would have occurred to some in our group." (Some permit opponents' lives were threatened.)

It looked like the hearing was being run by a group called Friends of Coal, Stanley said, because individuals from that group were pressing everyone who walked through the metal detectors to take their t-shirts or stickers. (Environmentalists maintain the Friends of Coal is an "astro-turf" outfit created by the West Virginia Coal Association.)

Several hundred miners and their families couldn't get inside the civic center. They were angry and targeted anyone they thought was an opponent of mountaintop removal. Deanna Goblirsch arrived with three fellow activists, and all were immediately surrounded. "We were screamed at, and one of us had his shoes



spit on,” Goblirsch said. “Miners were getting shoulder to shoulder, screaming, ‘We’re not letting you out of here.’”

Goblirsch said she had to scream twice before a police officer escorted her to safety. Several MTR opponents were told by the police they had to leave for their own protection.

Two days after the hearing, some of the same MTR opponents who attended the hearing went to Madison, West Va., where Matthew Louis-Rosenberg was the last of eight activists to go on trial. He faced felony charges of trespassing and conspiracy for his participation in a May action at an MTR site, where activists chained themselves to mining equipment for several hours.

Louis-Rosenberg was convicted and received no jail time, but his fines and court fees totaled more than \$2,500. Since February of this year, more than 100 people have been arrested in a dozen non-violent direct action protests. Chuck Nelson, a disabled veteran underground miner who is now an anti-MTR activist,

said he’s never seen this much tension in the region.

“Men are really scared about their jobs,” Nelson said. “[But] if they ban mountaintop removal, they can still do deep mining.” In fact, Nationwide 21 permits are not currently used in southern West Virginia due to a court ruling, though they are used in other Appalachian states. (Opponents fear they could be resurrected if they are not eliminated altogether.)

But regardless of what the Corps decides, southern West Virginia’s coal won’t be around too much longer. Data from the U.S. Energy Information Admin. indicates that based on current technology and production rates, all of the region’s mineable coal will be gone in a dozen years.

Just before the verdict was announced in Madison, Louis-Rosenberg and about 20 supporters went to eat at a local restaurant. After a waitress took their lunch orders, a young man appeared from the kitchen and asked, “Are y’all the tree huggers? Because if y’all are, my boss said you have to leave now.” ■

## Sitting in for Healthcare

**S**INCE SEPTEMBER 29, when Mobilization for Health Care for All organized its first sit-in at health insurer Aetna’s New York City offices, more than 147 activists with the group have been arrested in 24 actions around the country. Protesters, opposed to any healthcare reform without a public option, have also occupied both Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s office in San Francisco and Senator Joe Lieberman’s office on Capitol Hill.

Mobilization, a two-month-old conglomeration of healthcare action groups, organized the protests as part of a campaign for what it calls “Medicare for all.” Groups in each city work with the new umbrella organization to set up national days for civil disobedience. Since the Aetna sit-in in New York, thousands of protesters have joined the movement, refusing to allow insurance companies to

## DEAR ITT IDEOLOGIST

### Dear ITT Ideologist,

As an informed citizen, I keep a list of vexatious nations so that, in the event of a crisis, I can look them up in my atlas and note their size, population, location, tungsten production, dairy herds, etc. I notice my list hasn’t changed much in recent decades. Is that good or bad?

—R. McNally, Skokie, Ill.

### Dear Rand,

Like many things in life, it’s a bit of both. On the sentimental side, we’ve grown accustomed to our foes. They almost make the day begin. On the substantive side, the older they grow, the harder it is to make a menace of them.

The oldest and dearest is North Korea, which has spent 60 years on our threat board. Cuba is now celebrating its 50th anniversary as an ever-present danger to the western hemisphere. And it’s already 30 years that we’ve been expecting the Shi’ite to hit the fan in Iran.

Venezuela has been menacing our backyard for a decade. And for the last

couple of years, we’ve warned of mischief making in Bolivia, Ecuador and, once again, our old favorite, Nicaragua.

As a man of the world, you should know that our problem is that these nations are disobedient rather than dangerous. Diplomatic and political niceties necessitate that we pretend to respect their sovereignty even as we scheme to overthrow and dominate them. Thus we label them “dangerous” to subvert those restraints and keep the pot bubbling. A robust threat list is, after all, the best tonic for a bounteous military budget.

In reality, our threat list should be growing, since ever fewer countries are doing our bidding. But acknowledging so much defiance would alarm the public. Thus we keep the list, with its familiar cast, basically the same. By the way, what is the state of dairying in North Korea?



### Deer ITT Ideeit,

Gwen Beck says Obama put a lot of sars in the govmint. Sars are from Rusya and that’s komunistical. Did yoo heer about it? Or are yoo a dem, too?

—Y.A. Hoo, Hoopleville, Ind.

### Dear Mr. Hoo,

I began to hear about it on Mr. Beck’s show. It was as I was driving my one-way

rental truck, filled with all my belongings, into the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel on my way to Toronto. So I briefly lost the signal. When I exited on the Canadian side, Beck was crying inconsolably, having discovered that the words “e pluribus unum” on the dollar bill were actually communistical propaganda inserted by the same Kenyan cabal that planted Obama’s birth announcement in the Honolulu newspapers. I switched to a Maple Leafs game and sped up.

—Pete Karman

## PROTECTING GRANNY

While Republicans cry out against pulling the plug on Granny, they fail to address a real problem: the abuse and neglect of the elderly in U.S. nursing homes. Across the country, allegations of sexual assault, failure to provide necessary care and negligence resulting in injury or death reveal a systemic problem that will only be compounded when Baby Boomers swell the ranks of institutionalized seniors.

Elderly abuse includes inappropriate use of drugs, degrading treatment, verbal attacks and financial exploitation. No one knows the true extent of nursing home abuse. National statistics on the abuse don't exist, because there are no federal standards governing care facilities for our elders. However, in 2003 the National Research Council Panel to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect estimated that "between one and two million Americans age 65 or older have been injured, exploited, or otherwise mistreated by someone on whom they depended for care or protection."

Each state has its own long-term care ombudsman program dedicated to improving healthcare and quality of life for nursing home residents by supporting legislation that achieves these goals. These ombudsmen need help. To stay informed about elder abuse, contact the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse at [www.preventelderabuse.org](http://www.preventelderabuse.org).

—Diana Novak



continue to profit by denying care. Chanting "Patients, not profits," they have entered insurance headquarters and blocked the doors, leaving only when either the company grants coverage of treatments for those with life-threatening conditions, or when they are arrested.

Kai Newkirk, National Coordinator for Mobilization, says that the campaign wants to spotlight the real cause of the healthcare crisis. "We are never going to get real reform until we are able to stand up to the insurance companies and dramatize how much incredible suffering they have caused because they deny care to maximize profit," Newkirk says. "By spending money that should be going towards care on huge ad campaigns, lobbyists, and campaign contributions, they are trying to keep us from exercising our will on Congress. Until we get them out of our politics and separate them from our democracy, we won't see reform."

One man's experience with coverage denial has motivated him to take his protest a step further. Sam Pullen, 31, was arrested during a sit-in at Blue Cross's LA headquarters as he paid tribute to his mother's quest for cancer treatment at the same office. When Pullen was a teenager, his mother Leanna Bell was diagnosed with multiple-myeloma. Blue Cross wouldn't cover a recommended bone-marrow transplant, so she staged a one-woman sit-in at the office until the company agreed to pay. Receiving the transplant allowed her to live for five more years.

After being arrested, Pullen refused to post bail, electing to remain in jail until Blue Cross met with him to discuss his demands for universal coverage. Five days later, Pullen's bail was waived and he was removed from jail against his will. Pullen says his discharge was the result of "mounting pressure from the public."

According to Newkirk, "When people are willing to do more than just show up and chant, when they are willing to risk arrest...it shows the urgency. It moves people to believe, as we do, that healthcare is a right."

The group hopes its actions will be the largest nonviolent protests since the civil rights movement. Within three weeks of its late September launch, the campaign



A protester is arrested by police at the Los Angeles offices of Cigna, a major U.S. health insurer..

received more than 850 pledges from Americans "willing to put their bodies on the line," Newkirk says.

The first sit-in in New York earned insurance coverage for a man with both cancer and AIDS. "We are already winning small victories in terms of individual cases," says Pullen, "and once enough of these happen the industry as a whole...will say, 'We need to stop trying to save money when people are dying because that is really going to get us bad publicity.'"

Pullen recognizes the collective effort that healthcare reform will need in order to achieve the campaign's goals. "This issue is so fundamental, and has affected so many people—this goes beyond race, class, gender—everyone has been affected by the profit-hungry, greedy insurance industry," he says. "I've gotta tell you, it feels redemptive, it feels good, to stand up for what's right."

—Diana Novak

## Jews on J Street

WASHINGTON, D.C.—THE 18-MONTH old liberal "pro-Israel, pro-peace" Washington lobby, J Street, went into its first annual conference on October 25-27 with huge momentum and a news spotlight that only grew with the event itself. Expecting 1,000 participants, its venues overflowed at Washington's Grand Hyatt Hotel with an announced total of 1,500 registrants. Most sessions were mobbed.



J Street has grown from a founding staff of four to 30 today. It absorbed the student-oriented Union of Progressive Zionists (founded by left-Zionist groups several years ago) as its youth arm and renamed it “J Street U.” About 250 J Street U activists had just concluded their own national meeting and were very much in evidence at the larger event.

In the weeks prior to the conference, J Street completed negotiations to ally with Brit Tzedek V’Shalom (the Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace), which has a “grassroots” following in 30 local chapters. It will serve J Street as its field arm.

Jeremy Ben-Ami, J Street’s founder and executive director, delineated the group’s three major objectives as: upholding the “right of the Jewish people to a state in the land of Israel,” the “right of Palestinians to a state of Palestine,” and that “the U.S. should help.” Ben-Ami spoke of being “pro-Israel, not anti-somebody else.” The conference frequently echoed with words about “inclusiveness,” “widening the tent” and how being “pro-Israel” requires being “pro-Palestine.”

J Street designated approximately 20 peace-oriented Zionist or human rights organizations in the United States and Israel as “partners,” with a number presiding over concurrent breakout sessions, on such issues as settlements in occupied territories and Israel’s social problems. Among the more than 100 speakers listed were a number of Arab-American community leaders, Palestinians from the territories, and the Jordanian ambassador to the United States.

The “host committee” of 160 members of Congress dropped to 148, due to alarms raised by *The Weekly Standard and Commentary* on J Street’s alleged anti-Israel positions, and the refusal of Michael Oren, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, to attend. The Israeli embassy’s press statement explained that it “has been privately communicating its concerns over certain policies of the organization that may impair the interests of Israel.” The most prominent of the six Democrats scared off were New York’s two senators, Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand; of seven Republicans, all but one dropped out—Rep. Boustany

of Louisiana, who appeared on a panel with three Democratic House colleagues.

But both Israel’s head of state, President Shimon Peres, and the leader of the parliamentary opposition, Kadima party chair Tzipi Livni, sent friendly greetings.

J Street received the support of the White House, with a speech by National Security Adviser James L. Jones emphasizing how President Obama shares J Street’s stand for the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel as the firmest guarantee of Israel’s security. While Obama appeared personally at last year’s AIPAC conference, it must be regarded as a coup that Jones, his 4th ranking foreign affairs official (after Obama, Biden and Clinton), was allowed by the White House to deliver what J Street, the new kid on the block, billed as the keynote address.

Yet J Street’s nuanced “pro-Israel, peace” agenda is attacked from the center and left, as well as the right. At a packed plenary session, Ben-Ami politely debated Rabbi Eric Yaffie, a mostly liberal Reform Jewish leader critical of J Street’s opposition to Israel’s recent Gaza offensive and its preference for diplomacy over sanctions regarding Iran and the nuclear issue.

Two days prior to the conference, journalist Jeffrey Goldberg published on *The Atlantic*’s website a transcript of his contentious phone conversation with Ben-Ami. Goldberg, who was a vociferous proponent of the War in Iraq, had chastised Ben-Ami for not “renouncing” support from Stephen Walt, co-author with John Mearsheimer of a book that blames the “Israel Lobby” for the war in Iraq. While Ben-Ami sees their thesis as resembling “conspiracy theories contained in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” he wouldn’t renounce Walt because this “smacks of witch-hunts and thought-police.” Ben-Ami is not someone who wants to shut down debate by condemning people he disagrees with.

Still, in defending his pro-Israel credentials with Goldberg, Ben-Ami’s words became fodder for critics in the left-wing blogosphere, such as Max Blumenthal and Helena Cobban. He drew their ire in part by saying to Goldberg: “I hope we get attacked from the left because I would characterize J Street as the mainstream of

the American Jewish community.

But Ben-Ami would argue that if he can show the President and the U.S. Congress that most American Jews support a strong and consistent effort to end the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians though diplomacy, everyone is helped in the end.

—Ralph Seliger



Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Mich.

## Exhibits of Conscience

SOME PEOPLE THINK of museums as refuges of the past, full of brittle documents and mothballed artifacts. However, the new Immigration Sites of Conscience project draws on the historical authority of museums while pulling them into one of the most highly charged issues of the present: immigration.

As part of the initiative, which launched this fall and continues indefinitely, museums across the country are hosting exhibits and events while reaching out to local communities to address the many faces and facets of immigration. The project is a spin-off of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a global network of historic sites—like the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis and the Gulag Museum in Russia—that seek to commemorate the past and provoke dialogue about the present.

The Levine Museum of the New South



**KABUL, AFGHANISTAN**—Young Afghans wear face masks as they walk in the main market on Nov. 2, 2009, in Kabul, Afghanistan. The Afghan government has ordered the closure of all educational institutions for a period of three weeks due to the sudden rise of H1N1 flu cases and after the first death from the virus. (Photo by Majid Saeedi/Getty Images)

in Charlotte, N.C., deals with the city's rapid shift from "black and white" to "technicolor," as the exhibit there describes it. Long a primarily African-American and white city, Charlotte is now home to large Latino, African, Eastern-European and Asian immigrant populations who moved there in recent decades.

"Immigration is a challenging issue, it makes us think about what kind of South we want to shape going forward," said Emily Zimmern, director of the museum. "Will it be welcoming, or hostile?"

The museum has two dialogue programs: one for business leaders, journalists, law enforcement officers and others; another for teens. The idea is to offer people a space to open up about their own lives and feelings.

"We've found people often will say, 'I've worked with you for 10 years and I had no idea that was your story,'" Zimmern said.

The county government has enrolled

hundreds of people in the adult program, called Speaking of Change, as part of its diversity training. The teen program, Turning the Tables, forces participants to walk through a jungle of plastic strips emblazoned with hurtful stereotypical words—literally pushing through stereotypes.

At the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, visitors learn about an often overlooked segment of the American immigrant community – Cambodians – and the deportation of legal residents because of criminal convictions. Since 1975, more than 187,000 Cambodian refugees have settled in Seattle, making it the nation's third largest Cambodian community after Long Beach and Lowell, Mass. Many were born in refugee camps and emigrated as young children, obtaining legal U.S. resident status without ever knowing Cambodia.

Many young Cambodian men are in

gangs, often a result of their search for belonging or struggling, fractured families, local leaders say. Many end up with criminal convictions for gang-related crimes. Under existing immigration law, legal residents are ordered deported for criminal offenses, including many misdemeanors.

The exhibit, curated by a Cambodian American community activist facing deportation, puts Asian immigration in a historical context. "People might think we've always been the welcoming nation, but if you go back and look at laws they reflect something really different," said Cassie Chin, Wing Luke's acting director.

The Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Mich., features the experiences of four immigrant groups from three cities: Arabs, Latinos, Eastern Europeans and South Asians from Detroit, Dearborn and Hamtramck. Exhibits ask questions like, "Why are they here?" and "What keeps them here?" and dispel myths about immigrants, including the common refrain that they "steal jobs."

"These stereotypes are so far-fetched," said Museum Director Dr. Anan Ameri. "The immigrant community provides its own institutions... They're not taking jobs. If anything, they are creating jobs." She noted that in the Detroit metropolitan area, a national poster child for economic ruin, immigrant enclaves are doing relatively well because of how immigrants support each other and develop micro-economies.

Liz Sevckenko, founding director of the International Coalition, sees the program as a direct response to the polarized immigration reform debate. Although there are plenty of marches and protests related to immigrants and their communities, she thinks museums have a unique role to play.

"[T]hese places of memory have incredible power and potential, and therefore an obligation to...address what's happening currently," Sevckenko said. "Whether walking into the Great Hall at Ellis Island or stepping into a cell at Angel Island (in California) where immigrants were detained...you're feeling the individual human impact of these big policies."

**—Kari Lydersen**



# INSIDE CUBA

## VOICES FROM THE ISLAND



"The truth can not be blockaded."

**A**mericans—especially on the left—love to ask Cubans living abroad, especially Cuban-Americans, if we're for or against Cuba, if we're pro- or anti-Fidel, if we're revolutionary or anti-revolutionary. It's an awkward and ignorant question because it assumes our

situation is black and white, binary, oppositional. I always say the same thing when I'm asked: "It's complicated."

The most crucial lesson I've learned going back and forth to the Island—and I do at least once or twice a year—is that we have to listen to each other, really listen. For me that has meant understanding that what Cubans in Cuba think is paramount. So when *In These Times* approached me to edit this issue, I asked that it be an issue by Cubans on the Island.

I think culture, frankly, is a better indicator of the fu-

ture than almost anything else. So in this special edition, you'll find literary writers, rather than academic experts. They are not dissidents, though each is critical in his or her own way.

There are many other stories that should be here, that will, hopefully, be in future issues of *In These Times*. (In fact, our January issue will feature a dialogue, in which we will continue our Cuba discussion.)

This isn't definitive. It's just a glance. A peek inside.

—Achy Obejas

PHOTO BY: YOSVANY DEYA, HAVANATIMES.ORG

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Havana Bay Tunnel

# MYSTERY ISLAND

How Cubans resolve to survive

BY LEONARDO PADURA FUENTES

**I**F A GROUP OF people were to alight on the coast of Cuba in a hot air balloon and, like characters in a Jules Verne novel, try to understand their surroundings in order to guarantee their own survival, they'd certainly think they had arrived in an enigmatic world where the most varied and intricate mysteries reign, hermetically sealed from logical thinking and barely intelligible even to the native population on this singular island.

After half a century of revolution and almost the same number of years under socialism, Cuba has made irrefutable—if controversial—strides in culture, sport, health and education. The historic leader no longer officially governs, but he lives—and occasionally thunders—though strictly through his writings. The new president,

with a discourse of realism, creates hope for change that, nonetheless, comes slowly or not at all.

The miracle is that we survive in the midst of persistent scarcities (food, always and above all else, food). Our society is increasingly more diverse, pluralistic and weary. A notable and increasing percentage of the population is impoverished and either apathetic or focused on exile as an answer. The orthodox socialist economy, in which three official currencies circulate, is dysfunctional. We are besieged by a North American commercial embargo that is almost 50 years old. But more than anything, we are overwhelmed by our own proverbial inefficiency because of excessive central planning.

These would be, among other and greater matters, the most visible charac-

teristics of contemporary Cuban life and the keys to the mysteries in which that life is shrouded.

Perhaps the first and most curious enigma arising from life in Cuba is the daily planning by its citizens. Even the Cuban government recognizes that the salary (on average 440 Cuban pesos—CUPs—per month) it pays its workers—the vast majority of the population—is not enough to cover their needs. How, then, do Cubans survive?

Let's say that a pair of the most ordinary shoes costs around 20 CUCs (Cuban convertible pesos, a hard currency)—more or less equivalent to \$25 or 500 pesos. In other words, a pair of the most ordinary shoes costs about 60 pesos more than the average monthly salary of 440 pesos. How does a worker buy those shoes and also pay for

food, electricity, transportation, etc.? On the face of it, an insolvable mystery.

Another mystery: The groceries subsidized by the State and provided through the monthly ration cards barely cover the nutritional needs of a person for 12 days. How is a Cuban supposed to eat for the rest of the month, especially when prices at the CUC stores and the farmers' markets are prohibitive? Let us realize that one liter of soy cooking oil costs 2.15 CUCs, or \$2 U.S., or 54 pesos—that is about an eighth of the average worker's monthly salary *just* for one liter of oil.

One more mystery: If a ride in a taxi that runs along a specific city route costs 10 pesos and workers earn, on average, about 18 pesos a day, how is it possible that so many people depend on those taxis to get to work?

And if, in spite of these and so many other real-world, day-to-day mysteries, the nation's media repeats over and over that the island is some kind of oasis for justice, equality, security, educational guarantees and healthcare, why do so many Cubans emigrate or want to emigrate, especially the young and the skilled? This is another of those many Cuban mysteries.

To help us decipher these conundrums

that on first and second glance seem incomprehensible, there is a verb that Cubans use daily—a verb re-semanticized by popular wit—that offers an important clue: *resolver*, or *to resolve*.

In Cuba, people *resolve* when they practice any of the many survival strategies that allow them to buy a pair of shoes, pay for transportation, find enough food so as not to go hungry, paint the house

ing housing or simply obtaining needed documents without a wait). You *resolve* when you work with tourists who tip, or when you work with an *empresa mixta*, a Cuban- and foreign-owned business, in which the foreigners (taking on the fiscal burden) pay their Cuban employees under the table in addition to the salary the State gives them. The doctor who accepts gifts from his patients also *resolves*

## IF THE ISLAND IS SOME KIND OF OASIS FOR JUSTICE, EQUALITY, SECURITY, EDUCATION AND HEALTHCARE, WHY DO SO MANY CUBANS WANT TO EMIGRATE?

(a gallon of paint costs about 10 CUCs, more than half the average monthly salary) or pay for what's probably the world's most expensive cellular phone service.

You *resolve*, for example, when you have a relative abroad who frequently sends a few hundred dollars to the family "inside." You *resolve* when you steal resources from the State (from a chicken thigh to a box of chicken thighs), or use an office with some authority to sell favors or services (it can be exchange-

or, even worse, the teacher who takes what's offered by parents interested in their children receiving good grades. All these people are *resolving* something.

Of course, both the act and the need to *resolve* generate certain social ills: different levels of access to goods and services depending on which goods or services *resolve* the most; the corruption of many public functionaries (so many that the Cuban leadership recognizes that corruption is an enormous threat to the system's survival); disdain and indifference by those who can't *resolve* or by those who can *resolve* without the need to work or to make much of an effort to do so.

To *resolve*, then, is indispensable to Cubans, but it's also a social, economic and ethical waste. And it will be until the day that the workers mentioned above, in the first mystery, can live on their salaries, as they should be able to in a socialist state with healthcare, education and access to culture guaranteed to all—and still buy a pair of shoes.

**T**HE GREAT CRISIS of the '90s—officially christened "The Special Period in Times of Peace"—that followed the fall of East European socialism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union (resulting in the loss of the political allies who sustained the island's economy) generated a deep rupture at all levels of Cuban society: economic, social and ethical.

In 1993, one of the practices introduced

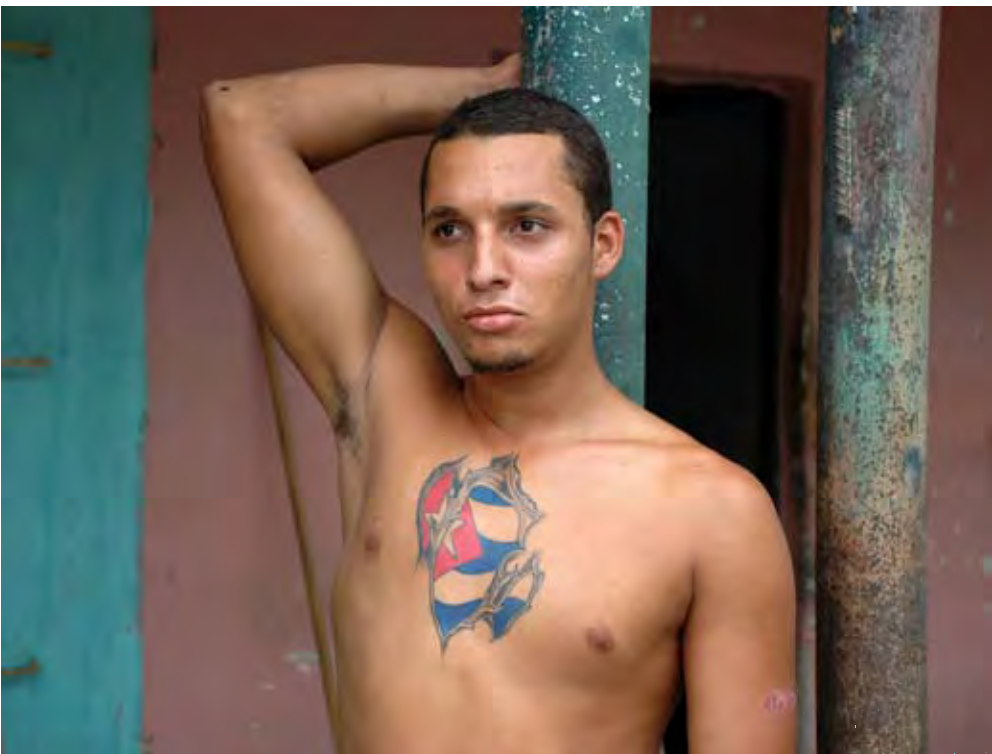


PHOTO BY: KALOIAN FROM CINCUENTA VECES CUBA

to alleviate the crisis was the creation of a double monetary system (Cuban pesos and American dollars), a double economy and a double market. Until that time it had been a crime to own dollars. Since then hard currency—first the U.S. dollar and now also the CUC (these convertible pesos are pegged to the dollar)—is used to price just about everything in the country: from the aforementioned pair of shoes, cooking oil and paint to transportation, fuel and even certain official transactions. In the meantime, the costs of other services subsidized by the State—electricity, phone, medicine, rationed food quotas—have increased and their price in Cuban pesos are now out of reach of most citizens.

In the last three years, the new government in Havana under Raúl Castro has tried to find solutions to these complex economic and social problems. The public acknowledgment that “structural and conceptual” changes to the system are necessary to guarantee its survival was accompanied by specific economic and social policies designed to stimulate certain means of production, service and even

morale. These include allowing Cubans to buy computer equipment and cameras in stores that take CUC currency, to enter hotels on the Island where previously only foreigners were allowed, to have cellular phone service, and to rent empty State-owned stores that are now largely overgrown with weeds. The new reforms also eliminate salary caps and allow Cubans to have more than one job. There has been an opening up on issues such as sexuality and the right to sex-reassignment surgery, and a new flexibility on the canons that govern artistic and cultural expression. Limits have been placed on the privileges that certain government bureaucratic sectors and their employees have enjoyed for decades. And moves are afoot to ensure Cuba’s adherence to international protocols on civil and human rights. All these are concrete moves to correct absurd and obsolete restrictions, although as “structural and conceptual” reforms they’re still too subtle given the need of our society and economy for more dynamic and transformative changes.

The centralized economy, the poor effi-

ciency in production, the high cost of living (which must be measured in hard currency, and not the Cuban pesos in which State wages are paid), the great housing shortage (and the bad conditions of much existing housing), the limits on social activity and personal development (like the official travel permit needed to leave the Island; most Cubans would like to eliminate it), and the visible increase in poverty and ghettoization are among the daily burdens Cubans bear today.

Fifty years after the coming to power of the men who still determine the destiny of the country, the reality of the situation is not totally satisfactory to a population that is as literate and cultured as any in this hemisphere, but tired from decades of material scarcities. The better future that was promised and dreamed of, the future that would come after so many sacrifices, continues to be postponed. Instead, there’s always talk about new and more sacrifices.

What real future awaits us? That is another mystery, another enigmatic question to which so few of us have an answer. ■

## A DAY IN MY LIFE (ANY DAY)

BY YOHAMNA DEPESTRE

**T**ODAY IS THE DAY I’ve decided to write about. I’m sitting on the top bunk in the room I share with my son Bayron, who asks me to change the channel on the TV. My sister asks about the entrance exams for a city college she wants to attend. Today’s the day to deal with this blank sheet of paper. I imagine that I picked up a pencil last night, that I fell asleep with it in my hand, and that I’m ready for anything now.

Today’s first challenge: my son’s father has sent \$300 U.S. I’m not the only beneficiary. Here’s the note that accompanies the money:

“China (folks call me China):

Here’s something to help out a little. Please copy this message for my family so there’s no confusion.

\$80 for Bayron (our son), which in-

cludes what my mother owes you;

– \$70 for my mother;

– \$50 for my grandmother;

– \$30 for Maribel;

– \$30 for Papo;

– \$30 for Omni and Zona Franca (our poetry and performance groups);

– \$10 for my Aunt Zory, whose son is in prison.”

“Momma, I’m hungry,” my son says, poking his head out from the bunk below me.

“Then go get in the breadline.”

“I don’t want to.”

“It’s always the same with you: you never want to go get the bread. Can’t you see I’m busy writing?”

The girl at the Western Union office, which sends the money “fast and secure” according to its slogan, gives me the money in five \$20 U.S. bills, and the rest in tens.

She asks if I want to exchange them for CUCs, Cuban convertible pesos (we have a third currency too, virtually worthless in our economy, the simple Cuban peso or CUP, which is about 25 to the U.S. dollar and a few more to equal one CUC). I tell her no, that the money isn’t all for me.

The girl at Western Union hands me the twenties very carefully; they’re torn. But, in the moment, I don’t notice. I like her. We’re chatting about family health problems: she tells me that a friend took her mother home from the hospital to take care of her, and I tell her how my mother, recently recovering from an ischemia, was put into a non-intensive-care room and was almost given the wrong injection.

I thank the girl and put the money in my day planner, not in my wallet, because I don’t want to tempt the muggers. But when I get home and check the money, I





Yohamna Depestre

COURTESY OF YOHAMNA DEPESTRE

realize all of the twenties are torn. I try to tape them up.

My father tells me he had a lot of trouble changing a torn bill. He ran around until he found a bank that would do it, but it took a big chunk as a fee because it was torn. I can't believe it: two percent that the State already deducts, plus another percentage because it's torn.

When I get to the currency exchange, the doorman tells me I probably won't be able to get the bills replaced because I didn't do the original transaction there. He suggests I go back to Western Union and ask the girl there to exchange them, in good faith. When I saw her ancient adding machine, I didn't want to trouble her and didn't ask for a receipt—in good faith!

I run to the bus stop, the money stuffed in my day planner. Once I'm on one of the broken seats, I think about how the girl at Western Union fooled me, how she lulled me with her conversation and then ...

*"Momma, I'm hungry! I already got the bread!" my son yells up at me again as he gets back in the bunk.*

*"Do you want me to make you garlic toast?"*

*My son says yes with a smile.*

*It's okay, this is how I write: with people talking, the TV blaring, the radio on ...*

*I get down, pad to the kitchen, make the toast and bring it in. Then I climb back up and try to find my place.*

I'm on the bus thinking about that girl's face, the pitiful face she made when she looked at that old adding machine and didn't give me a receipt. Oh, I was stupid, so stupid!

I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid. It's just money for an old woman with cancer, for a young woman with epilepsy. How can I be afraid? My hands sweat when there's an argument, my heart throbs, my throat closes up. I imagine myself taking off my hoop earrings. Am I wearing my lucky elephant earrings? What am I wearing? Nothing lucky—that's what. I may as well be naked. And now I have to fight about money; it's always about money.

The bus leaves me a few blocks from the Western Union. I'm going to write all about this, and depending on how the girl at Western Union treats me, I'll decide if I believe in humanity. I walk quickly. As I hand my bag over to the bag-check woman, I explain why I'm here again.

"You should have checked the money. You're right to come back, though; they charge the family over there a lot to send it," she says to me in solidarity.

I approach the office door. There's no line. Good, because I plan on telling her,

"Hey, you have to give me my money, okay? I'm not leaving until you give it to me, even if you call the police." That's what I'll do. This money is for my ex-mother-in-law who has cancer (and whom I hate) and for my ex-sister-in-law who has epilepsy (and whom I hate even more.) I push the door, then realize it's locked and the lights are off inside.

This is what I get for not wearing my wooden elephant earrings. I take a deep breath and look around. I hear the girl's voice from somewhere.

"I'll be there in a minute. I mopped the office and closed it so it could dry."

*"China!" my sister calls out to me (as I said, everybody calls me China). "You didn't get the soy yogurt."*

*"No," I say. "I don't think they had any at the store."*

*"There's not even any soda; you should have gotten the yogurt."*

*She goes on, haranguing me, and I keep writing.*

The girl at the Western Union office approaches and I look up at her. I'm breathing heavily.

"Do you remember me?" I ask her in a low voice. She nods. "Nobody will change this money for me. It's torn. I've come all the way from Alamar with it."

"Of course I remember you. I asked you if you wanted to change it to CUCs."

She makes me take a seat, then gives me an official-looking paper. It's ordinance #33. It says that currency is coming into the country already in bad condition but it's fine to exchange it if it's torn or written on, so long as the serial number is visible and it's legally determined not to be counterfeit. I don't know what to say, so I just nod. How is it possible that no one else knows about this authorization?

"I'm going to exchange the bills for you, don't worry," the girl tells me. "I just gave you that notice so you could see I didn't do anything wrong."

I leave the office with the money in tens in my day planner, because of the muggers. On my way to work on San Rafael Street, I need to write something down and pull out my day planner. I feel something drop and remember the money. I'm at a park, on the exact spot where the store Fin de

Siglo used to be, before it was blown up in act of sabotage in the early days of the revolution. It was never rebuilt; instead there's this park—a hangout for beggars, crazy and indigent people, and male prostitutes too. I look around ...

*From my bunk, I see my mother gesturing at me, speaking gibberish. Since the ischemia she's had trouble communicating. "Do you want me to turn the TV on for*

## **WHAT AM I WEARING? NOTHING LUCKY, THAT'S WHAT. I MIGHT AS WELL BE NAKED. AND NOW I HAVE TO FIGHT ABOUT MONEY; IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT MONEY.**

*you, is that it?" My mother's TV, which used to be mine, has problems with the volume. I climb down and fix it for her.*

I stand here and look around again; I don't see anything on the ground. Maybe the wind blew the money away. I'm embarrassed to look. I pull my bag to my chest and count the money in the day planner. It's all there. I sigh with relief.

But this relief reminds me of something else: Yesterday, I left my 2GB memory stick on my computer at work. There was another next to it, a 565MB. All my work materials, plus my novel, are on that stick. I hurry. A memory stick costs 35 CUCs—almost two months salary—when they even have them in the stores, which is infrequently. It isn't the first time I've forgotten it, though, just like many of my co-workers; when I see they've left theirs, I don't touch them, I don't even put them in a drawer.

I open the door to the small government publishing house where I work. The air conditioning reminds me I've been walking under the scorching sun on Obispo Street between the local hustlers and foreign tourists. I go to the computer in the back, where my boss and co-worker, Félix, is writing. I check for my memory stick, but it's not connected to the computer.

"Have you seen my memory stick?"

Félix pushes his glasses up on his head. "I didn't see it," he finally says. "I don't think it was here."

I look for it under the table. I look in bottles I find hidden under there. Noth-

ing. I can't believe a girl who doesn't know me, in an office that's alien to me, is more honest than my own co-workers. I look everywhere, but nothing.

"Eiko was here before me. He went home already," Félix says.

Another co-worker has arrived. "Sandra, have you seen my memory stick?"

"I just got here. I don't know anything." She doesn't even look at me when she an-

swers. She sinks into the chair in front of a computer.

"For God's sake"—actually, I don't believe in God, I'm an atheist—"all my work is in there. If Eiko saw it, why didn't he put it in the drawer?" I interrupt Félix again to look through it just as the door opens and Maite, the designer, and a technician come in from having lunch.

"Don't get that way," Felix says. "It'll show up." He gives me Eiko's phone number.

I dial 9 to get an outside line and then the number. A woman answers.

"Eiko probably hasn't had time to get home yet," Felix says without looking up from the keyboard. And he's right. I hang up.

Maybe it'll be better if I go eat. I go to the secretary, who's the person authorized to give me a ticket for lunch in the office cafeteria.

"Oh, I'm so sorry; I forgot to get a ticket for you. I thought you weren't coming in today."

I tell myself: I really needed those lucky elephant earrings today.

My stomach grumbles. Sometimes I come to work just to eat. The secretary sees that I'm making a face. She asks me something but ... I'm so hungry, so hot, so in need of ... I know I'm focusing on my memory stick because I need to repress my anger, but I barely manage.

I leave the secretary's office with her apology rolling around in my head. I walk past the hallway between my office and the lunchroom. Without meaning to,

I read the menu posted on the door: rice, peas, soy burger, bread and soda.

I go back to the phone and call Eiko. "Yeah, I took it," Eiko says on the other end of the line. "I gave it to Maite. I told her that she should give it to you as soon as she saw you, whether you asked for it or not."

Maite isn't at her desk. I wait 20 minutes and then write her a note.

*My eyes are irritated from trying to write under this yellow bulb. I'm tired of getting in and out of this bunk bed, but I decide to go get the soy yogurt. I look for the ration card so the grocer will give me what is due my family and me. But as I go out the door, the sun momentarily blinds me. I stop and wait to adjust to the heat and the light again. I glance at the ration card and realize we have already received all the yogurt we're going to get this month.*

I leave my office and go home. I take the bus, which is suffocating. I stand in the middle, where it bends like a worm, and hold on. I no longer give a damn about the muggers. Before leaving the office, in the note to Maite, I said something about "my apologies to Eiko." My apologies. I don't even know what for. Since I've started to work, it's been an adjustment. I've become a hypocrite. I think that, at 39, I've finally begun to understand what that means. I'd always heard a certain hypocrisy was a sign of good manners.

The bus is entering Alamar. The man next to me has a spool of green thread on his finger, like it's for sale. A large sweaty woman is on the other side of me. The man with the thread holds it out to her (yes, it's for sale) and she shakes her head no.

"Driver, please stop!" yells out a woman with a baby in her arms. We can barely stand as he takes the curve. "Driver, please!"

The tree I spy out the window disappears in a flash, like my memory of the secretary who forgot my lunch ticket, ordinance #33, the note I left for Maite, the fight I'll probably have with her later. Instead, I watch the woman with the baby, who's slipping in his loose diaper.

"Driver, stop! Stop already!" I scream with a voice I hardly recognize.

We can feel the hissing of the brakes, the shudder of the chassis, the popping sound of the doors opening. ■

# FROM FIDEL TO RAÚL

## Continuity, change and perspective

BY NORBERTO CODINA

**I**N JULY 31, 2006, Fidel Castro, gravely ill, underwent emergency surgery and nearly died. He has been recuperating ever since.

The day of the surgery, national radio and TV broadcast Fidel's announcement that he was passing the government's reins to his brother, Raúl, first vice president of the Council of State and Ministers and, since the beginning of the revolutionary government, minister of defense. In keeping with the current constitution, Raúl was named interim head of state and then confirmed two years later by the parliament as the fourth president of the 50-year-old revolutionary republic.

### Who is Raúl?

Five years younger than Fidel, Raúl is not well-known abroad. As a result, he is always subject to reductive and prejudiced views from both detractors of and apologists for the Cuban revolution. Raúl shares the revolutionary experience with Fidel and has had a special personal and political relationship with his brother; he has always declared himself Fidel's most loyal partisan. But to those who really know the two men, the difference in their characters is considerable.

Neither as tall nor as charismatic as his brother, Raúl lacks Fidel's indisputable aura of Commander in Chief. He has been Minister of Defense since the first months of the revolutionary government, but is disinclined toward public appearances and speeches. Neither is he considered likely to engage in the kinds of long campaigns for and against different issues for which his brother was known.

His leadership in the Revolutionary Armed Forces for 47 years required of him a pragmatism uncommon among revolutionary potentates. For the past 20 years, the Revolutionary Armed Forces has been heavily engaged in business and trade. It is Cuba's largest corporation and runs, among other things, the largest ho-



Cuban President Raúl Castro speaks to the people.

PHOTO BY KALOIAN

tel and tourist chains in the country.

In spite of a reputation as iron-fisted and inclined toward drastic measures, Raúl made a seamless transition to a business mentality when Cuba most needed it. As a result, he is seen as someone who could respond with objectivity and urgency to the challenges ahead.

There's an anecdote that illustrates the differences between the two brothers. When the 82 revolutionaries aboard the yacht *Granma* disembarked in Cuba on Dec. 2, 1956, Ernesto "Che" Guevara described the event as a shipwreck. Several of the survivors wandered for days through the foothills of the Sierra Maestra and eventually met up with Fidel and Raúl Castro, who had also been on the boat.

Fidel, with conviction, declared: "There's no doubt now that we'll win the war." Years later, Raúl confessed that at the time he thought his brother was crazy. When Fidel reproached him for his

lack of faith, the younger Castro replied: "I absolutely believed in victory, but not that we'd be the ones to achieve it."

Unlike his brother, Raúl did not finish college. He was involved in student movements and, also, unlike Fidel, with the Young Communists at the University of Havana. The high positions that he and Guevara had in the rebel army during the struggle against Batista—long before the revolution had declared itself communist—were the pretext for many of the early accusations of communism, even though the Cuban Communist Party condemned armed rebellion and didn't join the insurrection in a decisive fashion until its final stage.

From this period, Raúl gained a reputation for being "pro-Moscow" or "pro-Beijing." This, combined with his pragmatism, prompted some to call him the Caribbean Deng Xiaoping and view him as a reformer—especially in economic



matters, where the unproductive Cuban economy urgently needs help.

Many Cubans think Raúl will be able to make the necessary changes to the Cuban economy. They attribute the economy's many difficulties to what is commonly known as the "double blockade"—the embargo by successive American administrations and central economic planning that is deficient and arbitrary.

Cubans have benefitted from 50 years of social security, healthcare, education, sports and culture, but they also have suffered from an economy that has been incapable of improving the quality of life.

The exhausting day-to-day struggle has caused an exodus of large numbers of young people, most with professional skills acquired thanks to the Revolution's educational policies. Without the possibility of a better quality of life, they are lured by the Cuban Re-Adjustment Act, a

U.S. law permitting all Cubans admission into the United States.

### Better times ahead?

Today, many Cubans are pinning their hopes on Raúl, not just for continuity and preservation of the social achievements of the last 50 years but for reform of a crumbling economy. They hope he will release the country's stymied productive forces, allowing for the development of a more dynamic and democratic civil society.

Certain changes made by Raúl at the very beginning of his governance indicate a willingness to look for ways to make the economy and the government more efficient. The handing over of large parcels of idle land to individual farmers, in a country desperate to recover agricultural traditions, was an important step. The government now includes more women and more young people, even after consolidat-

ing the Old Guard. There's also talk of reducing the number of ministries.

In July 2007, Raúl gave a speech that inspired hope because of its frankness. In it, he said that changes won't come as fast as they're needed. But much of the optimism eroded due to the unbearably slow pace of change since then. For many people, the spirit of that speech and the hope it inspired has proven ephemeral.

I don't believe Fidel has to die for Raúl to make his reforms. The continuity between them is self-evident, but so are their differences. In principle, if something doesn't change and move, it won't survive. For the majority of Cubans, the ideal would be to preserve the best of the past while transforming the present. Natural law means the revolution's seminal generation will soon reach its end. That generation has an obligation to bequeath future Cubans a better society. ■

## AGAINST THE DEMONS WHO KIDNAP INFORMATION

BY JOSÉ ALEJANDRO RODRÍGUEZ

*On October 16, Juventud Rebelde (Young Rebel), the official newspaper of the Union of Communist Youth, published an online article titled, "Against the Demons who Kidnap Information," by José Alejandro Rodríguez, a staff writer.*

I'M GOING TO DREAM one more time. I'm going to imagine that I've never before contemplated this to the point sheer exhaustion. I'm going to believe that this is a new concern. I'm going to convince myself that it's still worth the effort to deal with this old concept called information—trapped as it is between silence and excessive control.... In order to practice any style, form or tenet of journalism, you have to be informed... It is the journalist's duty and the right of the citizen—of that historic actor that has sustained the revolution and today more than ever needs to know what's going on—to be informed. ...

Never before has information been so

urgently needed so that Cuban citizens can interact and participate in society, as active subjects, and not like a "pichón" [baby bird]—a word so in vogue these days—who waits to get its exact dose of information delivered from above. ...

The problem—and we've experienced it at *Juventud Rebelde*—is that information can get through neither our economy's nor our society's excessive centralization and that hinders our democratic potential. What to say—and exactly what not to say—about the great issues of the day, is decided from on high, even as life stubbornly goes on down below in all its complexity.

It's sad that a minister can reject a journalist's request for more information, pretending that everything that needs to be known has already been said on "Mesa Redonda" [a nightly television round table in which the government's take on issues is presented]. Or, more precisely, all that the government wants said. ... That "mesaredondization" is a major contribution to the bureaucratization of Cuban

journalism—and I say this with all due respect to my colleagues who work on that program, and who are not responsible for this phenomenon.

Somebody—and I swear I can't imagine who that somebody could be—can decide that certain social or economic things need to be done, without a single bit of information being given to the citizens who have to implement those measures. For example, what is the process to request an application to receive unused land for individual farms, something that would, we are told, make our agricultural sector more dynamic? For an instant it looked like we could publish something, then it couldn't be even mentioned. Will we ever be able to write about it? I've been told by the editors here that the order for silence came from above.

Likewise, our media did not reflect the rich debate promoted by Raúl two years ago, at the height of our democratic socialism. We still can't mention this process, in which Party militants and revo-

lutionaries freely debated the problems that plague all of us.

The press is brought in, like sheep, to promote the new resolution about merit pay passed by the Ministry of Work and Social Security. ... But, in the end, the resolution is defeated because the bureaucrats don't want to deal with the complicated regulations that would restructure salaries. Egalitarianism is easier—the same pay for everyone. And no one explains why pay based on performance is blocked in Cuba. ...

Almost no one dares to release information to the media or develop relations with the press without a bow to their superiors. And many times, the chain of genuflection goes through so many levels that the news is buried forever. ...

Information is a public benefit, and we can't substitute it with opportune and sanctioned news, with virtual information, with information-propaganda or convenient information, information held up with tweezers, or whatever it might be called. Information is information.

In any case, information—with its nuances, its shades of gray—will always make us more efficient and more revolutionary, more conscious of the historic moment; more prepared to discern the possible from the impossible, and more participatory. ... Cubans need to look to the future, to know what's going on, and to not wander like beggars in search for a stale crust of information. Cubans need to

actively participate, to propose and be taken into account, to discern between good and evil in order to make the Revolution stronger. ... Without information, without citizen participation, it will be impossible to lay the foundation for a more open and democratic socialism. ... The revolutionary journalist needs to continue the struggle. ... If they close the door on you, that's news. An alternative to being shut out is to focus the story through non-institutional sources, sources that aren't so high up—through the people that are the major support of the revolution. And to do it with

conviction and responsibility.

*Juventud Rebelde* has come a long way and won a great deal of prestige in this Cuban struggle against the demons who kidnap information. Are we going to retreat? That's the principal challenge of this newspaper's new leadership, still unnamed, but which is in fact all of us. ■

Several hours after its publication, the article vanished from the site. It has never been re-published and does not appear in the newspaper's archives. For a longer version go to [InTheseTimes.com](http://InTheseTimes.com).

## GUERRILLA BLOGGING

### A virtual democracy against all odds

BY ORLANDO LUIS PARDO LAZO

**B**LOG." MANY PEOPLE IN Cuba don't understand all the fuss regarding this mono-syllabic word that seems to have no relationship to the daily routine of survival.

On the Island, the blogosphere is an incipient media and, outside of Havana, all but invisible. Though their work generates controversies and awards worldwide, Cuban bloggers are largely unknown here. With Internet access in Cuba restricted to

the very few, the nation's bloggers function as a kind of guerrilla underground. They work as independent agents whose existence heralds a civic re-activation that will modulate the Revolution's *Realpolitik*—or is that *Raúlpolitik*?

*Blogs Sobre Cuba* ([blogssobrecuba.blogspot.com](http://blogssobrecuba.blogspot.com)), an online database founded in 2007, lists more than 1,000 blogs on Cuban topics, both on and off the island.

The State monopoly of the printed word,

which continues to be the media most read, doesn't seem interested in acknowledging the 21<sup>st</sup> century's cursed tetragrammatron: BLOG. So when a State journalist needs to quote from some foreign (never domestic) blog in his article, he does it with sterilized surgical gloves, never explaining the format of his source.

Curiously, these same State newspapers have their own digital replicas that are a lot less orthodox than their print counterparts. They're on State cyber-portals



Cubans ride bicycles past a mural depicting leaders Fidel and Raúl Castro, and Che Guevara.

that celebrate the government's achievements in health, sports, technology, education, tourism, culture, etc. As a counter-offensive in the "War of Ideas," dozens of official journalists are also allowed to hang blogs on sites such as Bloggers Cuba ([www.bloggerscuba.com](http://www.bloggerscuba.com)) and Blogueros y Corresponsales de la Revolución ([www.bloguerosrevolucion.ning.com](http://www.bloguerosrevolucion.ning.com)). In both cases, the vast majority of these writers are male and white—not exactly reflecting the country's population or the rest of the world's multi-culti blogosphere. Even Fidel Castro has become a blogger with the publication of his reflections in *Cubadebate* ([www.cubadebate.cu/categoria/reflexiones-fidel](http://www.cubadebate.cu/categoria/reflexiones-fidel)).

Anidelys Rodríguez, a communications professor at the University of Havana, has studied the blogs in the State-sponsored Cuban blogosphere. According to Rodríguez, the majority reflect "professional ideologies and traditional news values" and "a self-imposed commitment to re-affirm national identity." In other words, these are not personal blogs but appendices to the State media in which the writers already work.

### Perilous connections

But for a Cuban blogger to get to the mythical Ithaca that is the Internet, they must first navigate an odyssey of obstacles. First, there is the scandalous cost of connecting, which in just a couple of hours can swallow an average monthly salary (\$15 to \$20 U.S.). Then there are the Paleolithic browsing speeds (usually less than 50 Kbps). And finally, of course, there is the ministry-level apartheid that prohibits Cuban nationals from opening a web account with ETECSA, the national telephone company—whereas any foreign resident can do so with a simple bureaucratic application accompanied by hard currency.

Nonetheless, whether through tricks or under-the-table payments, information in Cuba today travels with unprecedented speed. Some people use online computers at diplomatic compounds, like the U.S. Special Interest Section, and thus are attacked as "dissidents" by official spokespersons. Many occasionally log on from hotels to upload and download all their material for



Yoani Sánchez is one of the world's most influential bloggers.

the week—or the month. (Sometimes Cuban nationals are allowed to do this openly, other times they're banned from the cyber cafes at hotels that cater to foreigners; it's always a mystery what will happen at any given hotel on any given day.) Others don't upload or download their texts and images themselves, but send them instead, as e-mail attachments, to a collaborator who will do them the favor from abroad. This is also how many blogs publish in different languages.

According to the National Office of Statistics (which doesn't count anything outside of formal channels), out of a Cuban population of more than 11 million, only 1.5 million use the Internet. Online connections made through student or work centers ban "pornographic and counter-revolutionary" sites, creating an incriminating nexus between those two words, and denying access to almost everything published by Cubans abroad. Domestic connections authorized for individual government officials are, in practice, also domesticated: portals such as Cubanet ([www.cubanet.org](http://www.cubanet.org)) and Cuba Encuentro ([www.cubaencuentro.com](http://www.cubaencuentro.com)), both exile

news services, are blocked by the Cuban government, as are various proxy servers. Cuban national servers, such as *Infomed* ([www.sld.cu](http://www.sld.cu)) and *Cubarte* ([www.cubarte.cult.cu](http://www.cubarte.cult.cu)) only allow browsing on ".cu" domains, which are exclusively Cuban State pages and as such are a kind of cyber chastity belt euphemistically referred to as the "Intranet." In practice what this means is that most of the few Cubans who have online access don't, in fact, have access to the Worldwide Web at all—only to e-mail.

Users on these restricted networks assume that their e-mails are monitored, or even erased if they contain politically incorrect words. To violate State sensibility can mean having the service suspended, or worse.

Take the case of Ángel Santiesteban, who writes a blog called *Los hijos que nadie quiso*, (*The Children Nobody Wanted*: [www.cubaencuentro.com/angel-santiesteban/usuarios/autores-blogs/angel-santiesteban](http://www.cubaencuentro.com/angel-santiesteban/usuarios/autores-blogs/angel-santiesteban)).

Santiesteban, a much-lauded writer who has won most of Cuba's top literary prizes, wrote about the shameful behavior



at a minor Mexican book fair of a delegation of Cuban writers. In essence, he chided these writers “who never question government management” for opportunism, and for demanding abroad what they would never ask for at home. He quoted one anonymous writer as saying he/she had agreed to go to Mexico because of the “proper meals, daily clean sheets, CNN and hot water for showers.”

Following that blog post, Santiesteban was called in by an official with the Instituto del Libro. The tiff with the functionary inspired more blogs and an assault on the street that left Santiesteban with a broken arm, but still able to write. Since his blog isn’t available in Cuba, it was presumed that his assailants, who called him “counterrevolutionary,” were sent by State security. Santiesteban filed complaints with both the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba and the Ministry of Culture, which have promised to investigate.

Then there is the story of Erasmo Calzadilla, a former university professor who writes for *Havana Times* ([www.havanatimes.org](http://www.havanatimes.org)), an English-language portal that was originally run from Cuba by a State-employed, foreign-born interpreter. (The site is now operated from Nicaragua, where the owner lives after losing employment in Cuba.) Calzadilla, 34, was fired from his university, Instec, after posting a series of entries on controversial topics, such as the naïveté of foreigners when it comes to Cuba, or how gay Cuban couples have nowhere to go to have sex. He detailed his dismissal from the faculty in his blog as well and, now teaching at another school, continues to write for *Havana Times*.

In spite of this panoptic attempt to control a medium as emancipating as the web, Cuba has one of the most popular blogs in the world: Yoani Sánchez’s *Generación Y* ([www.desdecuba.com/generaciony](http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony)). Sánchez is a 34-year-old philologist who doesn’t write for a newspaper or have access to too many interactive tools, but she’s at the cutting edge of Cuba’s digital revolution. (The name of her blog stems from the curious predilection of Cubans in the ’70s and ’80s to name their children with Russian sounding names.) Like a lot of sites from the Island, including many official

ones, Sánchez uses a foreign-based server to guarantee the integrity and security of her material.

In a gesture of solidarity that serves as an example of the Cuba’s independent blogosphere, she shares her site, *Voces Cubanas* ([vocescubanas.com](http://vocescubanas.com)), for free and without hierarchies, conditions or political sectarianism, with any Cuban

national who wants to create a blog.

On a government site, *Cambios en Cuba*, [cambiosencuba.blogspot.com](http://cambiosencuba.blogspot.com), which seems practically dedicated to slamming Sánchez, authorities have added to the *Generación Y* logo a swastika and letters reading “CIA.”

Because of the stigma now attached to *Generación Y* many people interested in blogging are cautious about actually doing so just yet. But the diversity on *Voces Cubanas* is already well-known, including popular blogs like *Sin Evasión* ([vocescubanas.com/sin\\_evasion](http://vocescubanas.com/sin_evasion)) and *Desde Aquí* ([vocescubanas.com/blog/category/desde-aqui](http://vocescubanas.com/blog/category/desde-aqui)); the very dramatic *Voz Tras las Rejas* ([http://vocescubanas.com/voztraslasrejas\\_en](http://vocescubanas.com/voztraslasrejas_en)), written by the journalist Pablo Pacheco, who’s actually in prison at an undisclosed location and whose work is produced completely in defiance of the authorities; the irreverent *Octavo Cerco* ([vocescubanas.com/octavocerco](http://vocescubanas.com/octavocerco)); a replica of Sánchez’s blog, given that the original continues to be blocked in Cuba by the authorities ([vocescubanas.com/generaciony](http://vocescubanas.com/generaciony)) and my own photo-blog, *Boring Home Utopics* ([vocescubanas.com/boringhomeutopics](http://vocescubanas.com/boringhomeutopics)).

Due to the high cost of connection in Cuba, those who can connect rarely read online, so the distribution of blog materials on the island itself happens through other means, particularly memory sticks and CDs. Unquestionably, immediacy and feedback are affected by these second- and third-hand reading experiences, which sometimes disconnect the

bloggers from their natural audience.

In addition, Sánchez has organized *Itinerario Blogger 2009* ([itinerarioblogger.com](http://itinerarioblogger.com)), which facilitates theoretical and technical exchanges about the blogosphere and its repercussions worldwide. This past summer, Kelly van der Kwast ([www.huffingtonpost.com/kelly-van-der-kwast](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kelly-van-der-kwast)), a frequent contributor to the

Huffington Post, participated in an underground workshop in the provinces for future bloggers.

Though the Cuban blogosphere is still emerging and can only be read in its entirety from outside (of course, on the Island, State security apparatchiks follow every little millimeter of progress, every update), today there’s a certain optimism among local participants.

The State has not yet passed specific laws against a phenomenon as new as blogging, although the habit of accusing critical voices of being “capitalism’s useful idiots” or “mercenaries of enemy propaganda” can serve as a brake on free expression. “It’s secret work and neo-colonial journalism,” Fidel Castro said of Sánchez in 2008. But the attacks on and persecution of bloggers like Santiesteban and Calzadilla are, of course, frightening. There are also legal warnings issued for “peligrosidad predictiva,” or “dangerous pre-criminality,” which has been used to arrest and harass, but not yet convict.

Some well-known Cuban opposition figures have just recently begun to experiment with this form of instant publication, and they consider the bloggers possible allies in their efforts toward a democratic transition. But there’s a generational conflict because the bloggers’ infamy has practically taken traditional dissidents out of the media spotlight.

For now, the Cuban blogosphere perseveres, on and off the island, with a broad, chaotic diversity of opinion on all sides—a virtual democracy, against all odds. ■

## WITH INTERNET ACCESS IN CUBA RESTRICTED TO THE VERY FEW, THE NATION’S BLOGGERS FUNCTION AS A KIND OF GUERRILLA UNDERGROUND.

# GAY LIFE IN CUBA

## Not much has changed since Reinaldo Arenas' time

**EDITORS NOTE:** The following posts are from the blog "LGBT Cuba News Today," ([lgbt-cuba-noticias-hoy.blogspot.com](http://lgbt-cuba-noticias-hoy.blogspot.com)). In These Times offers this selection in lieu of the article that was to have been written by Mario José Delgado Gonzáles ([ultramario321@yahoo.com](mailto:ultramario321@yahoo.com)), who was jailed in August for trying to organize a Mr. Gay Havana contest. Delgado is the vice president of the Reinaldo Arenas LGBT Memorial Foundation, a group named for the Cuban poet and author of *Before Night Falls*.

**JUNE 3, 2009**

### Several young homosexuals arrested in May are sentenced to prison

Several young gay people, arrested on May 15 on the Island hours before the official celebrations of the Day Against Homophobia, were sentenced to two to four years of prison, according to a press release from the Reinaldo Arenas LGBT Memorial Foundation and the Cuban LGBT Committee for Human Rights.

The organizations didn't specify the exact number of those sentenced.

The young people were part of a group of 58 homosexuals detained in a raid called "Operación Pío" (Operation Tweet), who were forced to sign off on charges against them, fined and sent back to their provinces of origin.

**JUNE 4, 2009**

### Havana

"I don't want faggots walking around Havana—sooner or later I'm going to throw you all in jail after I exhaust all the warnings I'm going to give you," said Police Capt. Ángel of the Reina district, between San Nicolás and Rayo Streets, after he arrested 58 young people for homosexuality, according to José Luis, an HIV+ transvestite who was arrested four blocks from his home

for being homosexual.

"When I got to the station and asked why I'd been detained, an officer tried to hit me—I'm not sure how I avoided it. During the day, I have no complaints, but at night it's impossible for a transvestite to walk the streets. We live in a great state of fear on the streets. They come and detain you, just like that. And if you complain or defend yourself, it's worse because they beat you.

"I was on the P7 bus when suddenly it was stopped. The police blocked the transit bus and one of the officers came on the bus looking for homosexuals. He made me and two others get off. I was dressed as a woman. In the Reina district, the police are very violent and aggressive; it's directed by Capt. Ángel. He hurled insults, told us to shut up and hit us. The Captain said that if we wanted to walk around on the streets, Mariela Castro [Raúl Castro's daughter, who runs the CENESEX, Cuba's National Sex Education Center, and has started an anti-homophobia campaign] would have to buy us our own island." ...

**JUNE 23, 2009**

### Havana

Thirty homosexuals are arrested around the Capitol Building.

Thirty homosexuals were arrested Saturday, June 13, when the National Police from the Dragones station parked two Hyundai vans downstairs at the Capitol



LGBT-CUBA-NOTICIAS-HOY.BLOGSPOT.COM

A contestant in the first-ever Mr. Gay Havana contest.

Building, according to Amaury Cabodevilla Torriente, a blogger and member of the Center for Human and Sexual Rights (formerly Cuban Committee for LGBT Human Rights), an organization focused on monitoring police activities against gays.

**JULY 7, 2009**

### Seven young men are arrested in Playa del Chivo

Seven gay youths were arrested this Sunday in Playa del Chivo, outside Havana, for gathering in a public bathing area.

Ignoring the petition filed with the Ministry of Justice by the board of

directors of the Reinaldo Arenas LGBT Memorial Foundation asking for a stop to the police persecution and arrests currently going on in the capital's homosexual community, seven young gays were arrested at Playa del Chivo for insisting on swimming in the public beach, said Rene Alonso, 18, who was fined 30 pesos after the raid.

"We resisted being displaced; we didn't want to be forced out of the beach. They don't have a right to kick us out just because we're homosexuals. It's sad but true. The rest of the boys ran when they saw the squad cars."

### SEPTEMBER 1, 2009

#### Organization asks for help to produce gay event in Havana

After suffering persecution, arrest of its members and confiscation of computers, the board of directors of the Reinaldo Arenas LGBT Memorial Foundation asked for support from international LGBT organizations to produce Havana's first Mr. Gay contest. Recently, the members of the organizing committee of the contest were seized, beaten, arrested, and had their equipment confiscated by members of state security and the National Revolutionary Police. It happened as organizers met to go over the final details of the contest at the home of Mario José Delgado Gonzáles, a sociology student and the foundation's vice president. The repressive actions resulted in the arrest of Delgado Gonzáles and Belkis, also a university student and committee member, with the goal of having the contest canceled. Mrs. Gonzáles, mother of Mario José, did not know of her son's whereabouts for 12 days. In fact, he had been detained by state security and was imprisoned at Villa Marista.

### SEPTEMBER 2, 2009

#### Amidst Repression, Cuba Celebrates Mr. Gay Havana

After a 50 year wait, the Cuban queer community finally celebrated Mr. Gay Havana.

Cuban government security forces and police tried to shut down the cultural event. The repressive state forces beat

organizers, arrested activists, confiscated materials and, finally, banned the foundation's vice president, Mario Jose Delgado Gonzalez, from continuing his university studies in sociology. Delgado Gonzales had been jailed for more than a week without charges after a raid on his home during an organizing meeting. [He has since been released from jail, but is still banned from the university.]

In the days prior to the Mr. Gay Havana event, the leadership, members and supporters of the foundation underwent state persecution, interrogations and intimidation with the explicit purpose of terrorizing them and breaking up the organization. In spite of these repressive actions, the contest took place August 29, at 2 p.m., on Chivo Beach, on the other side of the Havana tunnel, usually one of the places of greatest police persecution and hounding of queers in the capital.

#### The winners of the Mr. Gay Havana contest are:

**THIRD PLACE:** Rafael Chávez González, 21 years old, medical student.

**SECOND PLACE:** Roger de Cruz Caballero, 19 years old, library science student.

**FIRST PLACE:** Asley Sarriá Arrondo, 21 years old, dancer and culinary student.

Next year, the foundation and the Mr. Gay organizing committee seek support to bring this cultural event to the interior of the country and in this way conduct a nationwide Mr. Gay Cuba contest.

### SEPTEMBER 10, 2009

#### Mr. Gay Havana, a medical student, detained for questioning

Rafael Chávez González, third place winner of the Mr. Gay Havana contest, was detained last Thursday and interrogated by members of State Security for participating in the illegal beauty contest, Mr. Gay Havana, which took place August 29, in Playa del Chivo.

"They told me the Cuban LGBT Foundation was an organization seeking to destroy the revolution, that the Mr. Gay contest was a distraction, one of the many fallacies of capitalism, that it was not a

serious contest in any part of the world, and that they didn't understand how a medical student, educated by the revolution, could take part in an event against the revolution.

"They told me the best thing I could do was to make a public statement saying everything was fraudulent, that what happened in Playa del Chivo was an event organized by homosexual anti-revolutionaries in Florida, and that they could prove that Efren Martínez, the homosexual counter-revolutionary monkey, was behind it all so as to draw attention to alleged human rights violations in Havana.

"They barely let me talk. It was impossible to make them see that the event was a completely cultural thing, that we weren't being used by anybody, that we'd been told many times by the organizers that it was possible that there would be repercussions because of the event ... we heard about what had happened at the home of the foundation's vice president, how the police beat them and confiscated the electronic equipment in the home, which made some of those who were there flee in fear.

"They insulted me when I told them the contest had been open and held with transparency, that it was the spectators who chose the winners, and how I saw for myself how the foundation formatted the only memory stick they had so they could offer it as a prize—a memory stick the government sells for 30 to 40 CUCs [Cuban convertible currency, roughly equivalent to the U.S. dollar], which would have been impossible for a student from a typical family to buy.

"That's when they asked me if I was interested in continuing my medical studies. They said all Cuban doctors have to be committed to the revolution and they need to have an unbreakable revolutionary conscience. They said they'd never allow a Cuban medical student to support the counter-revolution being orchestrated in Florida.

"I just hope they don't ban me from studying medicine just because I took part in a beauty contest." ■



# WE'RE BAD CUZ NOBODY LOVES US, NOBODY LOVES US CUZ WE'RE BAD

## A history of rock in Cuba

BY YOSS

**I**N SEPTEMBER 20, MORE than 1 million people in the Plaza de la Revolución watched Colombian rocker Juanes and his friends—cheering, dancing, swooning from the Havana heat.

Those that watched the concert know there was merengue, salsa Nueva Trova (the revolutionary folk pioneered by Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés), funk, hip hop and pop. But for us Cubans, only Carlos Varela rocked (the 46-year-old gnome with the black wool hat, the only one on stage who defied the order to wear all white and stuck to his trademark black t-shirt, a slogan across it that stated: “I’m wearing a WHITE shirt”). He was also the only Cuban on stage who made anybody nervous, singing his song, “25 mil mentiras doble la verdad” (25 Thousand Lies About the Truth).

After half a century of Revolution, the idea of Cuba and rock still strikes a discordant note for some. Rock was made official in 2007 with the creation of the Agencia Cubana de Rock. And it is accepted by the authorities in the Ministry of Culture, for whom it is the music of their youth. But rock still occupies a complex space. Its bad-ass attitude perfectly fits young people’s compulsion to rebel. But in Cuba, rebelling frequently invites suspicion.

In the early years of the Revolution, rock had no official support. In fact, a lot of young Cubans’ rock instruments were homemade; drum heads were patched with X-ray film and mics were lifted from old telephones.

Governmental hostility between Cuba and the United States gave certain cultural functionaries the excuse to reject rock as a way to show their “patriotism,” to “safeguard national culture” from “for-



PHOTO BY: CARIDAD, HAVANA TIMES.ORG

eign, noisy and scandalous beats” and to protect our “helpless youth”—the same young people who were dancing to rock in the countryside and in factories while building socialism—from the “ideological diversionism” represented by this “dangerous music of the enemy.”

So as not to seem too dogmatic, these functionaries added that they had nothing against rock per se, so long as it was in Spanish. So while the rest of the world was experiencing the British Invasion, official Cuban radio was awash with groups such as Juan y Junior, a Latin version of Simon & Garfunkel.

There was censorship in the streets too. Police and young party militants routinely raided Coppelia, the ice cream park in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana, to catch Cuban hippies and forcibly cut their hair, accusing them of being “homosexuals and anti-patriotic dissidents.” They also stopped hippies on the streets and inspected their vinyl records. If the album cover for Pello El Afrokán contained vinyl by the Rolling Stones, they would break the costly disk.

While the official media satirized rock fans and those who dared to defend their right to choose what to listen to, Cuban

youth listened to foreign FM stations and records brought by relatives and friends who were diplomats (creating an early instance of revolutionary privilege), aviators or merchant marines, any occupation that allowed travel to capitalist countries. Cuban youth danced to cover bands that played as close in style to these originals as possible (a performance style called “fusilar”). This imitation retarded the emergence of a Cuban rock with its own identity for another decade.

Influences like Nueva Trova, the occasional visit by foreign rock groups (including the socialist camp), and the constant imitation of Anglo-Saxon rock set the terms for the Cuban rock explosion that came in the '80s. Festivals such as “Caliente” at the Casa de Cultura in the upscale Havana neighborhood of Playa (which continues to host rock shows), concerts in the Soviet-style suburb of Alamar and events such as “Ciudad Metal” (Metal City) in the towns of Santa Clara and Cruces helped the more radical elements among the hard rockers to find a home in heavy metal. Fans of this style were referred to as “frikis” (there’s a debate about whether the word is derived from “free kiss” or “freaks”), which were distinguished by their dress and attitude: “We’re bad cuz nobody loves us; nobody loves us cuz we’re bad.”

Like the hippies before them, *frikis* gathered at Coppelia, and were constantly harassed by the police, who considered them anti-social, druggies and a source of delinquency.

Responding to this fan base, new rock groups refused to limit themselves to covers and began to write original work in Spanish. Yet, rock continued to face official criticism for distracting Cuban youth from the task of constructing socialism. Little by little, official resistance began to weaken and it became more acceptable to talk about a Cuban rock that didn’t threaten the Revolution, directly or indirectly. In 1987, María Gattorno, events director at the Casa de Cultura in the Playa neighborhood of Havana, created what came to be popularly referred to as “El Patio de María.” In spite of its meager stage and audio facilities, during its

16 years of existence, every Cuban rock group worth its salt played in that tiny courtyard.

Not everything was happy. In 1991, during a concert by Metal Oscuro at the Casa de Cultura in Playa, the police charged the audience with dogs, clubs and tear gas, provoking a near riot that the Cuban media completely ignored. Most concerts, of course, didn’t end badly, and many were wonderful.

In the '90s, following the collapse of the Soviet empire, Cuban rock experienced the devastating effects of The Special Period. Without state support, the regional festivals disappeared and rock fans in the provinces were left adrift.

### **Porno Para Ricardo**

The group that left the biggest mark on the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century Cuban rock is unquestionably Porno Para Ricardo (Porn for Richard), which was founded in 1998. Led by Gorki Águila, they started as punks with the institutional backing of the Union of Communist Youth, the youth branch of the Communist Party. But they soon began to take on an irreverent, profane and mischievous dissidence. Because of this, they were not allowed to play anywhere. Nonetheless, their albums *Rock Para Las Masas ... Cárnicas* (a riff on “*masas cárnicas*” or “meaty mass”—the mystery protein that is part of every Cuban’s official food ration) and *A mí no me gusta la política pero yo le gusto a ella compañeros* (*Friends, I Don’t Like Politics But Politics Likes Me*) became underground hits in Cuba, and their songs such as “*El Comandante*” (which contain the lyrics “No comas tanta pinga, Comandante”—“Don’t be such a cocksucker, Comandante”), “El Submarino,” and “Black Metal” have become popular sing-alongs among youth.

One of the most important bands right now is Tendencia, which has official approval. Following the example of Síntesis in the '80s, Tendencia, from the province of Pinar del Río, infuses its hard rock repertoire with Afro-Cuban rhythms, using the Yoruban batá drum as its foundation. “*Yoruba Soy*” and their versions of “Guantanamo” and “*Hasta Siempre, Co-*

*mandante*” have been hits in Spain, where they’ve toured several times.

Kiko Mederos, Tendencia’s leader, is also the provincial president of the Asociación Hermanos Saíz (an offshoot of the Union of Communist Youth), which is the island’s biggest rock promoter. Perhaps most significantly, rock was made official in 2007 with the creation of the Agencia Cubana de Rock (an outgrowth of Hermanos Saíz), which is headquartered at Maxim Rock, an old theater renovated specifically for rock performances with state-of-the-art technology.

Many still lament the passing of the unofficial El Patio de María, since, in addition to the shows, El Patio provided a place for young rock fans to congregate. Since there are almost no affordable places left, young people hang out on the streets, unaware that they are imitating the hippies and frikis from years before.

G Street (near 23<sup>rd</sup> St.) in Havana is now the informal space for rockers but it’s a mixed bag: there are rivalries between rock and emo groups, heavy metal and Trova fans, and those who still enjoy Cuban traditional music and the ever present reggaeton.

The complex conflicts between the metaleros, emos, repas and mikis are evidence of Cuban youth’s lack of opportunity. Repas are salsa and reggaeton fans who mostly live in the poor outer neighborhoods and don’t have much economic power. Mikis are obsessed with designer labels and the newest electronic toys, such as iPods, cell phones and MP3 players. They listen to techno and enjoy certain economic privilege.

The official attitude towards rock has, of course, changed over the years, from extreme ideological rejection in the first decades of the Revolution, to a certain acceptance. But, to be frank, it’s frequently a superficial and opportunistic acceptance. The Cuban state, like the establishment everywhere, would like to take advantage of rock’s mobilizing capacity to entertain/control youth who, more and more, see their own and their country’s future as less clearly intertwined, regardless of official speeches and campaigns about pride and resistance. ■

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**This *In These Times* Special Edition and the work of these writers are supported by The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and The Puffin Foundation.**

*These stories and others from "Inside Cuba" are available at InTheseTimes.com.*



Yoss



Kaloian



Caridad

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# Out of Control

Too big to regulate, the banks need to be broken up

BY DAVID MOBERG

**T**HE BIG BANKS ARE back, larger than ever, with profits and stock prices soaring and huge bonuses expected—thanks to taxpayers and the federal government.

That might seem like unabashed good news, but it's not. The real economy is deeply troubled, with unemployment and foreclosures still rising. Hefty, if uneven, profits at the biggest banks won't save Main Street. And the rosy impression that the financial system has recovered strengthens the industry's hand in blocking efforts to prevent another, possibly worse crisis from hitting in the near future.

The most obvious battle is over Democratic proposals to strengthen regulation of the financial sector. But the bigger challenge—one neither Congress nor the administration has fully engaged—is to weaken Wall Street's political, economic and ideological grip on the country. This would include shrinking the financial sector and its biggest players while redefining the public goals of finance itself.

Banking and finance lobbyists, calling in chits from their huge contributions to politicians in both parties, were busy in recent months trying to kill—or at least weaken—the first significant reform plans: a new Consumer Financial Protection Agency and regulation of financial derivatives.

Both proposals were aimed at four of the underlying and interrelated causes of the current crisis:

- Many financial products were and still are deliberately obscure, making it hard for the average person getting a mortgage or credit card, or even for supposedly sophisticated bankers buying credit default swaps, to know what they're getting.



Thousands of protesters demonstrate for bank reform at a rally in Chicago, Ill., on October 27.

- Many of these non-transparent products—like payday loans or subprime loans—were used to prey on the most vulnerable. In general, banks and financial institutions increasingly relied on fees and penalties—such as hefty charges for overdrafts on debit cards or fees for originating mortgages or for turning bundles of mortgages into securities—instead of the old-fashioned interest income from lending.
- As a result, the financial products were increasingly risky to both borrowers and investors, a risk obscured for several years by the run-up in housing prices, a bubble that partly resulted from use of products and practices with little or no regulation.
- These products were riskier still because everyone involved—from low-income home buyers to the giant investment banks—took on too much

debt. This was not just a result of low interest rates and Chinese savings loaned to finance its trade surplus. The debt boom was also the result of both weak regulation—including inadequate capital requirements for financial institutions and trust in those institutions and the market to assess risk—and a finance-driven view of the economy.

## 'Silent coup' of finance sector

New America Foundation economist Thomas Palley argues that the financial crisis is rooted in a neo-liberal growth model, initiated under Reagan, that was "built on financial booms and cheap imports." As a result, workers' pay lagged behind productivity growth, inequality increased, trade deficits grew, and both household and corporate indebtedness climbed.

The financial sector led the march to-

ward globalization and neo-liberalism. The industry grew dramatically, from 2.5 percent of GDP in 1947 to 8 percent in 2006, with the bulk of that growth from the 1980s on.

But financial industry profits and pay grew even faster: From the 1950s to the 1980s, financial firms reaped an average of 10 percent of total U.S. corporate profits. By the 1990s, financial profits fluctuated between 21 and 30 percent of corporate profits. They hit a high of 41 percent this decade. From 1948 to 1982, financial industry pay hovered around the average for private industries—and then shot up to 181 percent of average U.S. pay in 2007, according to MIT economist Simon Johnson.

The financial sector grew in part because of deregulation and development of new products, many designed to profit from growing financial volatility. Often, as with most currency trading, the innovations did little to help the real economy grow, but did create a new global casino.

Not all financial innovations are bad—take, for example, credit cards and mutual funds—even if banks find predatory ways to use them. But many innovations, rather than promoting growth, enriched the financial sector by imposing huge costs on consumers, non-financial corporations and the economy as a whole.

Johnson questions New York University economist Thomas Philippon's claim that the recent financial boom spurred growth, up until the past decade when it bubbled out of control. Indeed, for every high-tech or Internet startup that blossomed (often owing more to small venture capital firms than to big banks), there were an equal number of disastrous bank-promoted corporate takeovers that plundered and destroyed firms, as in the pending bankruptcy of Simmons Co., the mattress maker.

As physicists and mathematicians were drawn to finance by the fortunes to be made with complex models, the late Nobel economist James Tobin lamented that people were wasting talents on useless speculation and proposed a small tax on all financial transactions. As executives tried to turn every business into a financial play, the booming financial sector led

to bubbles that misallocated resources and to debt burdens that squeezed workers.

Traders routinely made millions of dollars a year, fueling a salary arms race among managers and professionals. As factory workers lost their jobs and trade deficits rose, neo-liberal apologists argued that America did not need to make

in the economy, banks got special insurance and regulation in the New Deal. The system worked well for many decades. But especially from the 1970s onward, banks became less interested in performing that useful task of "intermediation" and more obsessed with expanding their empires and enriching top bank employees. A diminishing number of banks now

## **As mathematicians were drawn to finance by the fortunes to be made with complex models, Nobel economist James Tobin lamented that people were wasting talents on useless speculation.**

things. It could simply export financial services.

Financial industry leaders, in what Johnson calls a "silent coup," persuaded politicians and regulators from both parties that banks and other institutions were so sophisticated they could assess and manage risk without any oversight. The government deregulated or failed to regulate, letting financial institutions grow so much that they were "too big to fail," implicitly guaranteeing a federal bailout if they got in trouble, and thus encouraging riskier behavior.

Now, Johnson suggests, as the industry fights even modest, common-sense rules, these banks may have become too big to regulate.

### **Bank busting**

Banks are supposed to serve one primary purpose—putting savers' money into the hands of borrowers who can make good use of it, making a profit on the transaction. Because of their key role

dominate the industry. They are too big, and their cost—including salaries and bonuses—is too high. An industry that should resemble a public utility has become a casino.

Beyond fighting for tougher regulation, including higher capital requirements, simplification or banning of many derivatives, consumer protection, provisions for resolving bank holding company failures, and many other provisions being debated in Congress, Obama and Democratic legislators should break up the biggest banks and limit their size. A Tobin-style transaction tax will help pay for past and future government interventions and shrink the industry.

The banking system needs to be treated as a public utility, with limits on both pay and bonuses, and higher top income-tax rates. Government needs to steer the economy toward ecologically sustainable growth and shared prosperity, heading off another, potentially even worse, finance-driven boom and bust. ■



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# TOXIC TURF?

More popular than ever, fake grass may not be so safe

BY GEMMA BALTAZAR

Champions of turf fields rave about their vivid green hue, easy maintenance, longevity and year-round availability. All of which has left old-fashioned grass virtually scoreless in the “real versus fake” debate. But underneath turf’s bright exterior lies a potential health threat that has led both state and federal government organizations, including the Environmental Protection Agency, to take a second look

at the seemingly perfect surface.

Turf derives a semblance of dirt from recycled tire bits. Dubbed “crumb rubber,” the material keeps the artificial blades of grass standing upright, while adding cushioning and allowing rain water to drain.

But while praised for their shock absorption ability, used tire crumbs contain harmful contaminants such as lead, mercury and benzene, often in unregulated amounts. As athletes play on turf fields, they kick up and then inhale these tire-dust particles. Moreover, the toxins in the crumb rubber may also contribute to ground water pollution. The layer of tire crumb infill can harbor bacteria, leading to infections (including staph). Crumb rubber also absorbs heat at a higher rate than natural grass, thereby contributing to heat-related injuries and conditions like burns, dehydration and exhaustion.

## Lingering questions

Despite these potential health threats and rising concerns from its own scien-

tists on the environmental and health effects of crumb rubber infill, the EPA has yet to issue a single report on the potential adverse effects of using crumbled tire particles to build artificial fields. Advocacy groups such as Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) have criticized the agency for not only endorsing something it has not thoroughly examined, but for misleading the public into thinking it was handling the situation.

This isn’t the only time that artificial turf has come under fire. In April 2008, the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services discovered lead dust in the pigment that gives turf its color in artificial fields in Hoboken and Newark. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission responded with a limited study, ultimately maintaining that the lead present posed no health threat.

But while the grass fibers themselves may be harmless, the lead inquiry helped spark a turf controversy that only seems to grow with the material’s rising use

around the country. During the past year, concern has shifted from the grass fibers to tire crumbs.

In fall 2008, amid concern from politicians and anxious consumers, the EPA called into question its earlier endorsement of the recycled tire used to cushion playgrounds and athletic fields, and announced that the agency would conduct a limited test of turf fields to see if a full study was necessary. EPA spokesman Dale Kemery previewed results in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* on June 30, indicating that “the raw data shows there is no inhalation danger to children who play on various types of artificial fields and play surfaces.” Kemery also stated that while the data so far indicates minimal risk, the results are still being processed.

In July, PEER, the group of whistleblowing environmentalists, filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the EPA’s findings. In response, EPA official Eric Wachter replied in a September letter that the agency was merely checking to see if a more in-depth study was necessary. This led PEER to accuse the agency of stalling.

Further investigation by PEER found that concern with artificial turf dates back to January 2008, when the EPA’s Denver office warned agency headquarters of the hazards of recycled tires, saying that the material may contain harmful heavy metals such as arsenic, mercury and cadmium. Denver officials even recommended the EPA take a neutral stance instead of backing the use of recycled tires for play areas. Nonetheless, the EPA has not pulled its endorsement of fields and playgrounds that use tire crumbs, and is instead waiting to determine if more

study is needed.

It remains to be seen whether the results of the EPA study will correspond with studies by governments in New Jersey, Connecticut, New York and, most recently, California, all of which have found turf poses little to no health risk. However, in August, synthetic turf industry powerhouse AstroTurf settled a lawsuit filed by California Attorney General Jerry Brown in 2008 by agreeing to reduce the amount of lead in its product from 5000 parts per million to 50 by June 2010. AstroTurf will also pay \$170,000 in fees and civil penalties under the settlement, in addition to funding a \$60,000 grant to California's Public Health Trust for the testing of existing artificial turf fields across the state.

Another event contributing to the ongoing concerns surrounding turf occurred in Tacoma, Wash. In December 2008, high-school soccer player Luke Beardemphl put a college soccer career on hold after being diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma. When his parents discovered that eight other soccer players in Tacoma had been diagnosed with various forms of cancer, it added to their belief that turf may be carcinogenic.

If the EPA study finds that tire crumble is in fact dangerous, it would affect both the recycling industry and those who shell out big bucks for artificial turf fields. Each year in the United States roughly 242 million tires are thrown away, according to the EPA. And the cost of a turf field? Between \$500,000 to \$1 million, says the Synthetic Turf Council.

### **Despite their safety claims, companies changing products**

Despite the AstroTurf lawsuit settlement, the turf industry is standing by its product. Citing a New York Department of Health and Mental Hygiene report that says toxic chemicals present in crumb rubber are typical in urban environments, G9 Synthetic Turf states that reports of turf's toxicity are generally based on "extreme laboratory testing" that "rarely replicates actual field conditions."

At the same time, however, turf companies are beginning to adopt safer manufacturing practices. Park of-

ficials in New York City have pledged to no longer use tire crumbs in their artificial turf fields, and some turf companies are adopting lead levels that conform to the standards laid out for

ards. Cilenti has long been concerned by how rubber particles seem to follow her everywhere—from the field to her apartment to the washer—even occasionally into her eye.

## **If the EPA study finds that tire crumble is in fact dangerous, it would affect both the recycling industry and those who shell out big bucks for artificial turf fields.**

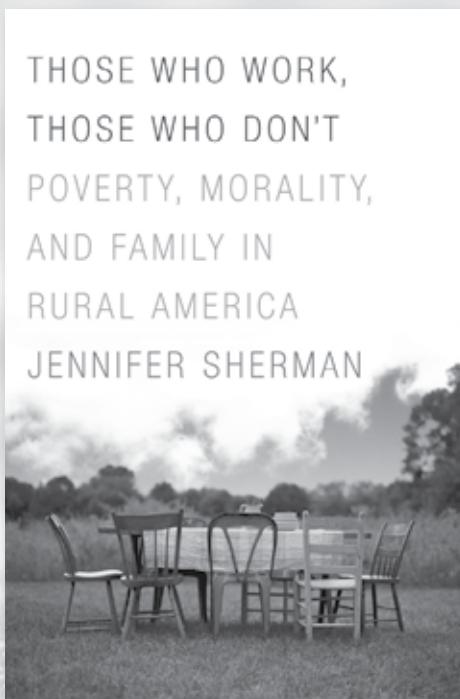
lead content in toys.

An example of a safer alternative to crumb rubber is known as FlexSand Action, a sand-based product that doesn't stick to people and is likely more environmentally-friendly than traditional crumb rubber, while still maintaining all its benefits.

That's good news for athletes like Michelle Cilenti, a 21-year-old club field hockey player at the University of Maryland who says she has never heard about crumb rubber's possible haz-

"Even though it's apparently hazardous, the benefits of a smooth game heavily outweigh the cons," she says. "Grass can cause the ball to pop up in unexpected directions which is both dangerous and extremely difficult to play with."

According to its website, AstroTurf is dedicated to "protecting the environment, your investment, and most importantly, your players." That may be true, but turf critics and the industry alike await the EPA's full report, which had still not been released by early November. ■



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Compellingly written, shot through with honesty and empathy, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't* is a rare firsthand account that studies the rural poor. As incomes erode and the American dream becomes more and more inaccessible, Jennifer Sherman reveals that moral values and practices become a way for the poor to gain status and maintain a sense of dignity in the face of economic ruin.

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MINNESOTA

BY ROBERT HIRSCHFIELD

## Shawn of the Left

Chances are if you are from New York and happen to be a serial protestor of America's foreign wars, you will find yourself at some point in the presence of Wallace Shawn, the actor, playwright and essayist. In his newly published *Essays* (Haymarket Books), he writes: "Not unlike those unfortunate

individuals who have somehow become addicted to pornography on the Internet, a frightening number of Americans seek temporary relief in nationalistic fantasies from the unsatisfying incompleteness of their daily lives—and then become hooked. It's been going on for years."

Shawn is the son of *The New Yorker's* legendary former editor, William Shawn. He himself co-authored and acted in the legendary film, *My Dinner With Andre* (1981), a dialogue over dinner between two friends discussing their respective mystical and rational views of the world. The author of plays that have been performed in London and Manhattan, he has appeared as a character actor in numerous TV shows. But he is most well known for his comic roles—the voice of Rex in *Toy Story* and the evil Vizzini in *The Princess Bride*.

At 66, Shawn is a contemplatively cherubic man who most recently appeared in Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Famous in an underground sort of way, he tells of being stopped in the streets of his city by fans and critics. The critics lambaste him for his attacks on Israel's Palestinian policies.

"That's all I ever get criticized for. Not for all the things I said about Bush. Not for anything else. Just Israel." In his essay, *Israel Attacks Gaza*, Shawn writes: "As the years go by, and the Holocaust fades further into the past, in every country more

and more people are born to whom the outrageous behavior of the Israelis seems simply hateful, and to whom justifications based in the past seem simply sophistical."

**In the essay in your book titled *Morality*, you claim to be an unapologetic advocate of comfort, while acknowledging that the exploitation and oppression of others makes your comfort possible. As a radical, how do you reconcile that contradiction?**

I suppose I believe that the solution to the problem of global injustice doesn't come from a single individual's behavior. I advocate for change in the world, which if it came quickly enough, might diminish my degree of comfort, and I could accept that.

**Did your childhood in a prominent liberal household, where you were exposed to thinkers of every kind from everywhere, shape your political thinking?**

Well, I suppose I had an advantage over most Americans in that many people who visited our apartment weren't Americans. So, I was never likely to grow up as a narrowly nationalistic person, or as someone who believed that only Americans were worthy of respect.

**When you began writing plays in the '60s, did you immediately explore political themes in your work?**

No. But in a funny way I always associated plays with politics. For instance, my first play was very quiet and gentle. It had maybe twenty-five Catholic monks

as characters. I believed its very gentleness was a rebuke to the Vietnam War, and might have an effect on ending it. The first play of mine in which I mention a specific place, person and time in a political context was *Aunt Dan And Lemon*. [Aunt Dan, an Oxford don, is a defender of Kissinger's Vietnam policies.]

**How do you see the tradition of politically engaged playwrighting in this country?**

Well, there was the Group Theatre, a community left-wing theatre in the '30s. Strangely, the political plays of Clifford Odets and others did not really have any successors. They did not start a tradition of playwrighting, but the type of acting that was developed there still predominates to this day. Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan were members. They later formed the Actor's Studio.

**Had you been born in a previous generation you probably would have been an excellent candidate for a blacklist.**

[Laughs.] Yeah. The people on the blacklist were for the most part quite courageous. You could get off the blacklist just by naming names. I have never been tested.

**Have you ever imagined how you would have reacted to being called before a committee?**

Have I imagined it? I imagine it almost every day.

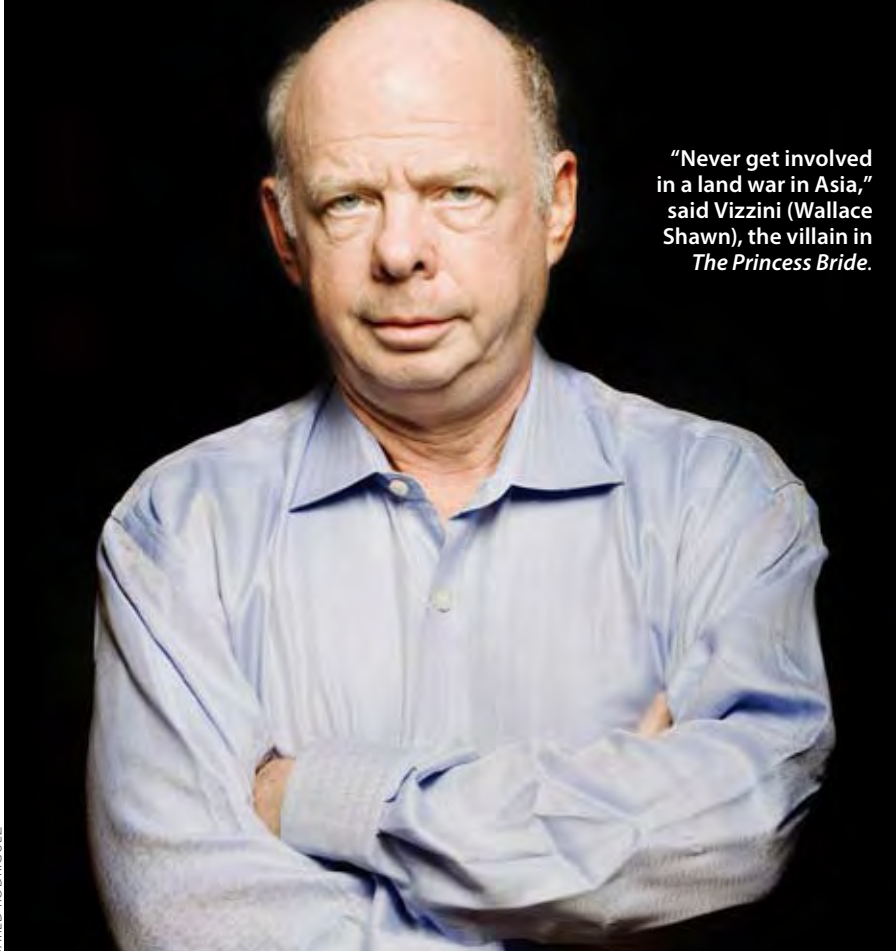
**What do you imagine?**

Like many dreams, they don't really go to the end of the story. I mean, I imagine being called before the committee, but I don't see what I would do.

**Knowing yourself, don't you know what you would do?**

I don't know myself very well. We know ourselves when a situation comes up. It's quite hard to predict how people will behave when the finger of history points at





"Never get involved in a land war in Asia," said Vizzini (Wallace Shawn), the villain in *The Princess Bride*.

you. Everything is different from what we might imagine. Everything. I have been to this restaurant very recently. [We are sitting at a restaurant in Chelsea, in Manhattan.] In fact, I have already been to this restaurant today. But I couldn't predict how I would feel coming into it.

**Can you imagine a political version of *My Dinner With Andre* being made, where instead of two old friends meeting over dinner to discuss the meaning of life, you engage in an edifying conversation about world affairs?**

I think that a well-written version of *My Dinner With Andre* that was completely political could be fantastic. Well, if you imagine a liberal, and let's say a communist, meeting after a certain period of time. As a matter of fact, if we did *My Dinner With Andre* 10 years later, it would have been much more political. I imagine it could be a wonderful story. In my own case, I was an ordinary centrist at one time. I only became more left-wing when I was 40. I had conversations on the dramatic side when I was going through that change. If someone wants to write the script, that would be great.

**You introduce us in the essay, *After The Destruction of The World Trade Center*, to the much-needed Foreign Policy Therapist. Do you think progressives should struggle to make this a cabinet post? And would you be willing to take it on?**

[Laughs, then abruptly serious.] I do think that political people are often disturbingly uninterested in psychology. And I think that was one of the disastrous facts about many left-wing revolutionaries. They were not sufficiently psychological. They lacked self-awareness, and they didn't take notice of the dangerous areas within themselves.

**When you were at McNally Jackson, a bookstore in Manhattan, reading from *Essays*, a questioner suggested that you come across as the "fool" in your public persona. Might he have been alluding, do you think, to your un-self-consciously out-of-step approach to politics and most other things, as if almost inviting obscurity?**

Well, I can't explain it. I shouldn't even begin talking about it because I can't explain it. I seem to have a point of view, or a way of thinking about things, that is funny.

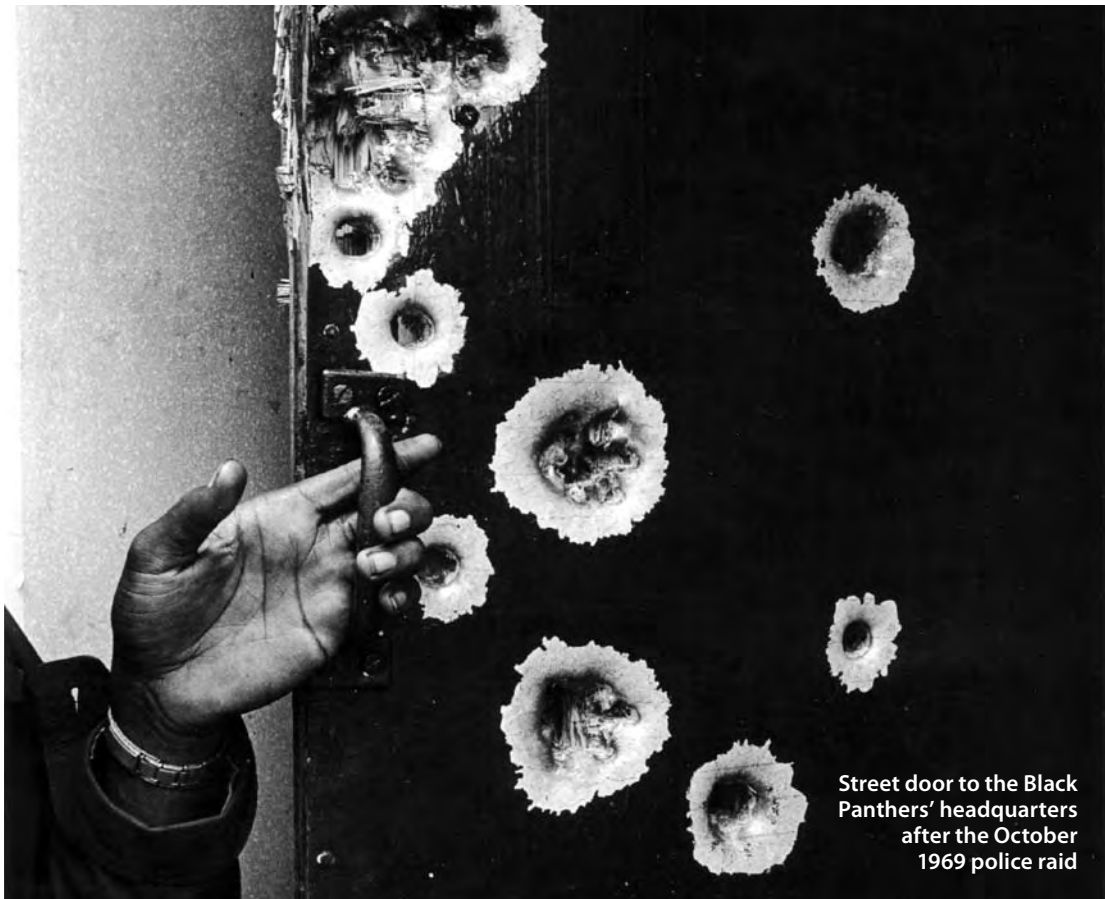
I don't even know what that means really. Let's start from the premise that the world is so astonishingly far from the way it ought to be that one is driven to ask what thoughts can be large enough to figure out a way forward. There isn't anybody who has mapped it all out perfectly. We have to look in every possible direction.

**Give me an example.**

I am going to tell you a story a friend related to me. Indira Gandhi came to this country, and wanted to meet with a bunch of writers and intellectuals. So, they all gathered in this room somewhere, and the surrealist writer Donald Barthelme was asked what he thought the world needed. He quite sincerely, when answering this important head of state, expressed the belief that maybe the way forward could be found somehow through poetic intuition, through the irrational, through the illogical. Maybe politics is too vast to be left merely to political philosophers. Maybe we need the insights of poets as well. Karl Marx was a staggeringly, unimaginably brilliant man with incredible insights. But he lived and died and the problem remains.

**Last year, with the presidential election, Americans went through a period of tremendous optimism that was focused on Obama. What were your feelings about Obama? Did you share people's optimism?**

Obviously I was thrilled that the American public declared their feelings of being fed up with Bush and what he symbolized. I was also thrilled that the American public voted for a president who wasn't white. But I made no predictions about what Obama would or would not accomplish. I almost always have had a visceral dislike of American presidents. In the case of Obama, I actually feel an affection toward him. I feel that I know him. But I don't know him. Of course he has the characteristic that makes people think, "Oh, Barack shares my attitudes exactly. And if he doesn't act the way I want him to act, he is simply not able to, he is politically constrained." I know that I feel that. And if it's true in my case, and he is really a leftist in his heart of hearts, it raises the question: to what extent can an individual change his society? ■



BY SALIM MUWAKKIL

## Assassinated by the State

Jeffrey Haas tells a story that many of us have long waited to read. His book, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Lawrence Hill Books, November), is a much-needed corrective to a badly

distorted mainstream narrative of a key event in the history of the left and African-American politics of the late '60s. Haas reveals just how deeply the Nixon Justice Department was involved in the Chicago police raid on December 4, 1969, that killed Black Panther Party leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Hampton headed the Panthers' Chicago branch and Clark the Peoria, Ill., branch.

It is now clear that Hampton and Clark were victims of a plot hatched by the FBI and executed by the Cook County State's Attorney and Chicago police officers. Nonetheless, conventional wisdom portrays the Panthers as the villains. In 2006, Chicago's City

Council, under pressure from the Fraternal Order of Police, voted down a routine city ordinance to name the block on which Hampton's murder took place in his honor.

The accumulation of facts presented in Haas' book portrays Chicago police as all too willing to violate the constitutional rights of Panther members and supporters. He reveals the cynical treachery of State Attorney Edward Hanrahan, whose office planned the raid under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO). Haas also provides a damning portrayal of one obstinate judge's continued attempts to thwart the legal process.

But Haas also offers captivating details that add color and context to those turbulent times. He evokes the infectious spirit of change and activism that infused so many idealistic young Americans during the hallowed '60s. His accounts of growing up Jewish and middle-class in Atlanta, Ga., help locate the source of his unconventional political leanings. Haas' grandfather, for example, was an attorney for Leo Frank, a Jewish factory owner who was lynched in Georgia after being wrongly accused of murdering a teenage girl. His father was deeply involved in the civil rights movement in the South. Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), an icon of that movement, wrote the eulogy for his father's funeral.

Haas' forebears held radical positions for Southern whites, and it seems Haas was simply following ancestral footsteps when he aligned himself with the emergent black radical movement of the 1960s. Although many thought it unusual for an attorney with University of Chicago credentials to eschew wealth and status to associate with black radicals, it was a natural move for Haas.

His accounts of the life at the U of C law school, where he met a "persuasive" Bernardine Dohrn, who would become the leader of the Weathermen faction of Students for a Democratic Society, evoke a period infused with political passions. At that time, Dohrn chaired a group that sent law students to the South for summer jobs with civil rights lawyers. Haas was sent to his home, Atlanta.

"I had to go to Chicago to take my first steps to confront segregation where I grew up," he writes. Though easily parodied, the earnest idealism of those days provoked real change. Haas' volume reminds us how important naïve and optimistic students were to toppling barriers of segregation in the South.

Back in Chicago, after passing the bar and while defending suspects arrested during the violence that erupted following the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Haas met a like-minded attorney named Dennis Cunningham. They formed a friendship and partnership, and in 1969 they joined with two other lawyers to open the People's Law Office, which has

since gained an international reputation for conscientiously defending victims of overzealous law enforcement.

Haas also provides some historical context for the rise of the Black Panther Party, a group started in 1966 by college students Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale to address issues of police brutality in their hometown of Oakland, Ca-

plaintiffs received a \$1.85 million settlement, although the government admitted no wrongdoing) and legal vindication of the People's Law Office. He details how the FBI, the Cook County State's Attorney's office and the Chicago police conspired to assassinate Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. He clearly reveals, for example, how COINTELPRO, which sought

## **It's clear that Hoover's designation of the Panthers as 'the greatest threat to the internal security of the country' provided law enforcement with a virtual license to kill.**

lif. Seale and Newton decided to form an organization of armed volunteers to confront abusive police officers directly. At the time, it was still legal to brandish unconcealed weapons in California.

The idea that African-Americans could physically resist police mistreatment was very attractive to urban black youth of that era. I was one of them. And, like me, many had grown weary of watching nonviolent protesters for civil rights endure humiliating beatings at the hands of police.

The Black Panther Party's disciplined audacity offered black youth an alternative that resonated with the militant tenor of the times. Although the group embraced a quasi-Marxist ideology and provocatively challenged police authority, it spread like wildfire—mostly in the urban north. Their urgent sense of commitment to social justice permanently altered the street-gang culture of urban America.

The first Panther office opened in Chicago in November 1968. Fred Hampton, a charismatic 20-year-old who formerly led the Maywood, Ill., NAACP youth chapter, was given the leadership role by Bobby Rush, now an Illinois congressman, but then the Defense Minister of the Illinois Black Panthers. Haas gives us one of the few accounts of Hampton's life outside of his connection to the Panthers. Hampton grew up in Chicago's southern suburbs, the third child of Louisiana immigrants Francis and Iberia Hampton.

The true strength of this book is Haas' meticulous reconstruction of the particulars that led to the partial victory (the

to "neutralize" black leaders, provided motivation for the Hampton murder. The book's exhaustive account of this incident is one of the few investigations to explore the Hampton assassination. This is odd because many strands of U.S. history converge at this point. The FBI's COINTELPRO program, uncovered in 1973 by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, chaired by Idaho Senator Frank Church, sought to "prevent the rise of a messiah who could unify and electrify the militant Black Nationalist movement." That FBI directive helps us understand just how deeply the federal government feared the Black Panthers and someone like Fred Hampton. A popular leader with great potential, Hampton embodied the electrifying appeal of the Black Panther Party among a certain segment of black youth.

In retrospect, it's clear that Hoover's designation of the Panthers as "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country" provided law enforcement with a virtual license to kill. What's more, the reckless bravado of the Panthers often provided police a convenient pretext.

Haas' important book clarifies how the racial paranoia of an out-of-touch federal government produced a deceitful policy that trashed constitutional rights even as it ignored legitimate grievances.

This book should alter the conventional wisdom that the Panthers were a dangerous threat that the police had to eliminate at all costs. Haas reveals that the cost was much too high. ■



# Good Grief

By Kristian Williams

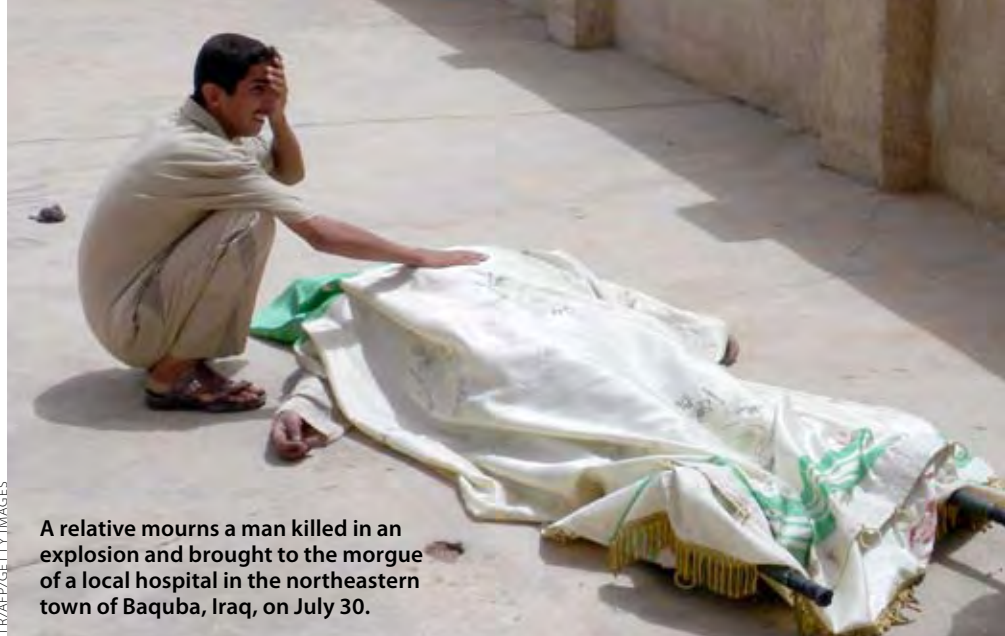
**W**HOSE LIFE IS worth protecting? If the question shocks us, it is because we hesitate to declare, by implication, that there are people whose lives *aren't* worth protecting. Yet, while it may not be put in these terms, this is exactly the sort of judgment that President Barack Obama has to make in deciding how many troops to leave in Iraq, whether to escalate the war in Afghanistan, and when to authorize drone attacks in Pakistan. The point of combat is to kill the enemy, after all, and in the right circumstances *anyone* may be expendable—our soldiers, our allies, civilians on all sides. Acceptable losses. Collateral damage.

In her latest book, *Frames of War* (Verso), feminist philosopher Judith Butler examines the cultural and ideological “frames” that deny the fallibility of the powerful and obscure the suffering of victims, thus simultaneously justifying violence while hiding its real character.

She writes: “If the violent act is, among other things, a way of relocating the capacity to be violated (always) elsewhere, it produces the appearance that the subject who enacts violence is impermeable to violence. The accomplishment of this appearance becomes one aim of violence; one locates injurability with the other by injuring the other and then taking the sign of injury as the truth of the other.”

This unequal distribution of violence, Butler suggests, is implicit in the idea of sovereignty. While others are potentially subject to the state’s violence, the state presents itself as uniquely immune to injury. “The sovereign subject poses as precisely not the one who is impinged upon by others,” she writes. “Such a sovereign position not only denies its own constitutive injurability but tries to relocate injurability in the other as an effect of doing injury to the other and exposing that other as, by definition, injurable.”

If the state, by definition, seeks a monopoly on legitimate force, then not only are all other actors excluded from its use, but there must also be some who are



A relative mourns a man killed in an explosion and brought to the morgue of a local hospital in the northeastern town of Baquba, Iraq, on July 30.

defined as legitimate *targets* for violence. The very idea of the state requires these distinct definitions of human worth, and the ideological framework of “legitimacy” works to articulate and justify those distinctions.

In opposition to this kind of thinking, Butler proposes an ethics of active non-violence based on the acknowledgement of what all human beings share—the precariousness of life, and our dependency on others for its continuation.

In other words, we all (at least at times) depend on others for our survival; therefore (at least in principle) we all have some obligation to others, those whose survival may come to depend on us. This interdependency is an inherent feature of our humanity. It traces out the limit of any simple notions of individualism or self-sufficiency. And at the same time, the lines of interdependence cut across all categories of group identity—race, class, gender, family, tribe, or nation.

Making the case against the claims of sovereignty and for an expansive solidarity, Butler hammers the conceptual pillars of the dominant American worldview—including individualism, national identity, progress, and modernity. In so doing, she complicates—or rather, confounds—any point of view that seeks to divide the world into “good guys” and “bad guys,” or even “us” and “them.”

And as it proceeds, the conversation takes us into some strange corners: the division (or connection) between religious and sexual identity, the tensions

inherent in any ideal of “tolerance,” the enactment (or denial) of grief, the criteria for citizenship, and the use (or restriction) or wartime photography.

There really isn’t a coherent narrative or an unfolding argument governing *Frames of War*, just a series of meditations centered rather generally on the subject of state violence. The parts add up to something less than a whole, though several of the parts *need* a whole to really function properly.

On the other hand, the abrupt shift at the beginning of Chapter Two actually comes as a relief, since the conceit of the first section is tiresome and unsound. Put simply, Butler argues that because grief shows that we value a life (typically, one that has been lost), a *failure to grieve* demonstrates a refusal to value that life, a denial of its status as a life.

Now, it is obvious that the U.S. government manipulated public grief (as well as fear) after the September 11 attacks, and did so to broker support for its own agenda. And it is equally true that the government has done what it can to limit American grief over the deaths of civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—and even to channel the grief over US casualties. However, Butler’s attempts to generalize from these facts and place “grievability” at the center of a broad ethical theory clearly push the issue too far.

Logically speaking, there is a difference between deaths that we personally don’t grieve and those that *cannot be grieved*. The word “ungrievable,” if it means any-

thing, ought to refer to the latter category—but that category is empty. And so Butler consistently blurs the distinction. Of course no one *really* denies that people in Iraq have lives, or that Afghans mourn their dead. But because Butler has made “grievability” the central issue, she has to act as though U.S. military policy is founded on an ontological mistake.

What I think Butler is trying to get at is that when *our* government kills people—even strangers, far away—we *do* have some real relationship to those deaths. Grief may, in fact, be an appropriate response. There’s no point, though, in pretending that grief is a necessary concomitant to recognizing another person’s humanity.

It must be said here that Butler’s prose style—in particular, her reliance on highly abstract language and declarative generalization—facilitates just this kind of error. This book would have benefited from a good editor, or perhaps a translator. Butler’s writing is not exactly *bad*; it’s

more like a perversion of goodness. Her sentences are carefully crafted, her diction is precise, and her rhetoric is sometimes beautiful—in the way that industrial music may be called beautiful. What it lacks, however, are the virtues of clarity, grace and sympathy for the reader.

And that’s a shame, really. For the questions Butler is addressing are—ought to be—crucial. At a time when our rhetoric divides the world between “Islam” and “the West,” and when the main controversy in American foreign policy is not “Is war necessary?,” but rather, “Is victory possible?,” understanding the ideological framing of warfare, the mechanisms by which it becomes culturally and psychologically acceptable, are concerns of the first order. Yet Butler seems strangely indifferent to whether her arguments can be understood. That’s bad enough, surely, when her ideas are mistaken—but it is so much worse when they happen to be correct. ■

## BOOKS

# School’s Cool

By Eve Ewing

THE OCTOBER 26 issue of *Newsweek* featured a cover story on the “three-year solution,” the belief of Robert Zemsky, a University of Pennsylvania professor, that the nation’s universities should shorten their undergraduate degree programs from four years to three. In a video on *Newsweek*’s website, Zemsky calls the youth currently entering higher education “mallrats,” who are accustomed to making decisions by “running from one end to the other, trying to compare.... They think that’s what life is—you run from one end of the mall to the other.”

By shortening the track toward a bachelor’s degree, Zemsky aims to rescue the mallrats from the Sisyphean burden of consumer decision; currently, he says,

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## PUBLIC ART IN HARD TIMES

Recognizing that during the Great Depression the country needed art more than ever, in 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration created the Public Works of Art Project—the first federally-sponsored program to support the arts.

1934: *A New Deal for Artists*, on display at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., celebrates the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Public Works of Art Project. The exhibit features a selection of art from the 3,749 artists who participated in this six-month-long program. The portraits, landscapes, and depictions of city and rural life were intended to build patriotism, promote the values of hard work and community, and maintain hope in a difficult time. Shown here is Lily Furedi’s *Subway*. The exhibition is on view through January 3.

—Gemma Baltazar



they are “petrified by the level of choice.” The thesis of the article, penned by former Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, is that the archetypal American university risks following in the accursed footsteps of the American car company. The assertion that schools must heed the warnings of the automobile industry is a bewildering one. “The business of business,” goes Milton Friedman’s legendary statement, “is *business*.” Why, too, must the business of education be business?

Mike Rose’s new book, *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us* (The New Press, September), explores the school-as-business model that has become so prevalent this decade, as well as other topics in contemporary education. Rose invites parents, community members and other stakeholders to join the conversation orbiting our educational system, and to reclaim it in the name of democracy and equity. He advocates for a discussion that appreciates the good things about schools, arguing that the pessimism of the dominant discourse helps perpetuate failure, or at least does little to advance success. To that end, Rose profiles remarkable teachers, engaged students and blossoming schools. His descriptions of each are underlined by his conviction that learning, as a human endeavor, is the exact opposite of business. It is magnificent. It is wondrous.

Rose encourages us to conceptualize education not as the dissemination of facts, or the completion of standards—a checklist we must move methodically along, from the age of 3 until we have finished it—but as the mysterious beauty of *learning* itself. Rather than blurring our vision over statistics on the facts students can or cannot recite, we should rejoice at the beauty of true learning that happens every day, all across the country: the thrill of a science experiment, the sublimity of a poem well-written or the dynamism of a classroom debate. More importantly, we should do whatever we can to perpetuate access to these experiences, and to protect our children’s right to the timeless human phenomenon of discovery.

The obvious counterpoint to Rose’s call for appreciation is that the optimism is unwarranted. As long as we continue to see statistical chasms between how poor-

## excerpt



*In The Making of an Elder Culture: Reflections on the Future of America’s Most Audacious Generation, (New Society Publishers, September) Theodore Roszak sets out to dispel the assumption that an older population will only lead to a slow economy.*

That bleak outlook is exactly what *The Making of an Elder Culture* rejects. It is not only wrong, it is *exactly wrong* by 180 degrees. The elder culture that is being improvised all around us day by day may not turn out to be an endless vista of fast-paced economic expansion and technological gadgetry, but it promises to be the road toward a saner, more compassionate, more sustainable world—altogether, a more important turning point than ever presented itself in the 1960s when boomers were coming of age. This, at last, is what the dissenting idealism of the 1960s was, in its highest and brightest expression, all about: a transformation of values that may finally reveal the goal of industrialization, the life-enhancing destiny that has lain hidden in the wrenching violence and extravagant physical and spiritual costs. In raising that possibility, I cling to one hope. Boomers, who will usher us into senior dominance, are the best educated, most socially conscientious, most politically savvy older generation the world has ever

seen. They grew up entertaining (if not always endorsing) countercultural values, reveling in their willingness to search beyond the limits of convention. Given sufficient awareness and inspiration, I believe that generation will want to do good things with the power that history has unexpectedly thrust upon it in its senior years. What boomers left undone in their youth, they will return to take up in their maturity, if for no other reason than because they will want to make old age *interesting*. Just as the Dutch have won land back from the sea, we have won years back from death. That gives us the grand project of using those extra years to build a culture that is morally remarkable.



ly students of color are served by schools when compared to their white counterparts, and how few resources are afforded to the 13 million American children living in poverty, it is difficult to shower our nation’s schools with accolades.

Yet, no matter how sorry—at least in quantified terms—the state of our schools may be, Rose argues convincingly against dwelling on despair. He shares an anecdote about a caller responding to his ideas on a California radio show:

He said it was ‘patently absurd’ to say the schools were doing anything right. He claimed that he ‘didn’t know one seventeen-year-old who could make correct change.’ What stayed with me from that call—for it was instructive—was the quality of the anger, the rush and the snap of it, and its sweep. It had a tremendous energy to it—it felt as-

saute, a bludgeon—and it did not, in any way, invite engagement, or mutual analysis, or thinking through a problem together.

In the conclusion of that chapter, Rose writes, “Public education demands a capacious critique.” Alas—in what arena of policy have we successfully cultivated productive modes of public discussion? When our attempts to grapple with healthcare and race remain mired in the realm of the juvenile, can education be the vanguard in driving civil discourse? Like the tenuous pathway that begins on a child’s first day of school—in some cities, a path as likely to end with a dropout as it is with a graduate—*Why School* can’t guarantee the realization of our dreams.

But, like that first day of promise, it’s an anxious start. ■



# Dear Students

Continued from back page

It seems to me, that many of you don't see current "issues" as connected to you. That nothing is "real" unless you've seen it on reality TV. The violence in the world can't match the latest hit film. Since there is no draft, attending college is no longer a prelude to going to Iraq or Afghanistan, except for those on ROTC scholarships. You think feminism is passé. For those of you who are white, racism is over, too, because Obama is president. There is no gender or racial gap at your minimum wage jobs at Abercrombie, The Gap and as student aides, but you haven't entered the real work force yet. There's a Stonewall Coalition at the university, but you don't need that because New York City has so many queer bars and you have the fake I.D. to get in. You're oh-so-out, though most of you can't apply the LGBTQ words to yourself in my queer courses.

I observe your lives. You are smart and can do things via computer I can only dream of. But few of you read a newspaper or even online news sites. However, you are constantly texting and twittering—opening e-mail seems too dated. You want the news to be as brief and fast as Twitter; you would like classes to move along in some more amusing format like animé. You avoid doing research if it involves books; the text you read is on your cell.

Call me old-fashioned, but I don't think that blogging or texting will get hundreds of thousands of people out in the street. If Martin Luther King, Jr. had blogged "I have a dream" on Facebook, how many would have twittered back, "Yeah, dude, I had a dream last night, too."

Life online has turned you away from the world around you. This virtual life is more real to you than planet Earth. As Taylor McHugh, one of my activist students put it, "Students feel apathy, not empathy."

When I was a student, the mimeo and ditto machines were the closest thing we had to going viral. Maybe some of us went out because we had nothing else to do, but there was only so long we could stay inside scrutinizing our Ché Guevara and

Madame Binh posters. It was also so much less dangerous back then to risk losing a college degree over an uprising.

I understand how different your world is from mine. I know how much harder many of your lives are than mine was 40 years ago. My total undergraduate education at Barnard cost approximately \$16,000, which my scholarship covered

teach extra courses or become a consultant on the side. For some, teaching IS the other job.

We on the Left haven't done our jobs. Some organizations, such as the Left Forum, Third Wave Feminism and NARAL, encourage on-campus recruitment and participation. But we probably would be appalled if our students wanted to do

**Call me old-fashioned, but I don't think that blogging or texting will get hundreds of thousands of people out in the the street. The Internet has turned you away from the world.**

part of. According to *US News and World Report*, for example, the average indebtedness of a 2008 Pace graduate was \$29,622. The minimum wage jobs that I worked at for \$4.00 per hour should be \$16 by now, not \$7. 25. I shared an apartment on the Upper West Side with three other students for under \$75 each per month.

I know that some of you have one job on the weekends, another at night; some of you work late as waiters, showing up the next afternoon to class hardly able to stay awake. (I know one of you worked all night at a supermarket, studying by sitting between the plastic bag holders when there were no customers.)

Some of you help support a single mother or siblings, but most of you simply have other priorities. You want things: brand-name clothes and shoes, iPods, iPhones, flat-screen TVs, fast laptops. Acquiring them takes weeks of work. Your drug of choice is consumerism, and you are its slave: You are Gen C, not Gen Y.

If I blame anyone, though, it is my colleagues and those of us on the Left who fail to lead and involve you.

I could blame the recession, but even in times of prosperity, most faculty members teach and go home. For most, there's no sense of responsibility to students outside the classroom. Some, mostly from the humanities and social sciences, supported an SDS uprising against Pace University's former president a few years back and helped oust him. It's easier and more lucrative for faculty to research,

more than simply support our efforts. We have not encouraged them to become leaders, instead of followers. In our early twenties, many of us founded or led organizations. Now we are still leading them, while the young remain powerless. They are the new women, relegated to making sandwiches and answering phones or e-mail rather than taking charge. The more Left groups became organized, the less the young were to be found in the hierarchy. Many groups suffer from "founders' syndrome," in which the original leaders are still there and not planning to step aside any time soon.

If we cherish our goals more than our own prowess, it is time for activists and tenured radicals to see ourselves as mentors and partners rather than leaders. This is how I now approach education, but shifting my attitude meant that I had to relinquish much of my power in the classroom. And that in turn has forced the students to take charge of some of the teaching, to abandon their comfortable passivity. It was and still is scary for all of us to some degree, but my battle-wise colleagues and comrades need to understand not only how much we can teach the young, but also how much we can learn from them if we will only listen. ■

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# Empathy, Not Apathy

By Karla Jay

Dear Students,

Where have we-your elders-failed?

Last year marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Columbia University uprisings. The students had many grievances, including the university's attempt to build a private gym in a public park and its involvement in the war in Vietnam, as well as the war itself and the unpopular draft. This year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of both the Stonewall uprising and Woodstock. My involvement with a radical feminist group, Redstockings, also began four decades ago. I emerged from these events and groups as a radical lesbian, feminist and pacifist, committed

to a lifetime of global struggle and local issues.

Reflecting back on these catalytic events, I wonder why you, my beloved students in women's and gender studies at Pace University, aren't out at the barricades in the fight against the interminable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, widespread genocidal acts against women, the lack of equality for the queer community and evil-doing by the banking industry.

I have tried to interest you in local crises through involvement in community outreach courses in which you work two hours or more per week in battered

women's shelters, at food pantries, in homeless shelters and with underprivileged children. I want you to become the next generation of activists. About one third of you enjoy your stint and get over feeling that community service is for felons. You stay on because you've bonded with your new community, knowing deep down that somehow you got more out of it than they did. (When I lost most of my eyesight and became a recipient of social services myself I found out that "it's easier to give than to receive" is not a cliché but a hard truth.)

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